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THE ART OF GETTING THINGS DONE

AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR AND CONSULTANT DAVID ALLEN

We live in a world full of stress, commitments, massive amounts of information, to-do lists that are always growing, and emails multiplying in our in-box. All of these things and more are true among church leaders, especially those who are engaged in new church start-ups.

In order to help us think through these challanges, we talked with David Allen, who *Fast Company* magazine calls a "personal productivity guru" and "one of the world's most influential thinkers on productivity". He has written the best-selling book *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*

(Viking, 2001), as well as a more recent follow-up, *Ready For Anything: 52 Productivity Principles for Work and Life* (Viking, 2003). Articles about Allen have appeared in *Fortune* magazine, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Wired* magazine, NPR, and the BBC. Allen has coached top executives at Microsoft, the World Bank, the U.S. Navy, and scores of Fortune 500 companies. He now travels throughout the world consulting, coaching, and teaching public seminars on organizational work-flow and personal productivity.

We spoke with him from his home in Ojai, California.

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What are the key concepts that you would want someone who is coming to your material for the first time to grasp?

I think the key concept is capturing, clarifying and managing the massive number of commitments a person makes at multiple horizons—with them-selves and everybody else. Most people simply don't realize how many commitments they have made, and the level of stress and distraction they live with when they are not responsible to them. They're trying to sit on top of this horse, but they find themselves being driven by the horse instead of guiding it.

So they have all sorts of things spinning around in their heads as a result of these various commitments, and need a way of capturing them.

Not only do you need to capture them, but you also need to clarify what exactly they mean to you. So, for example, you go outside and say, "The yard needs mowing." Now, a yard that needs mowing lets you know very easily what you need to do. But if you walk out and say, "I think I might need a gardener," *now* you have just stepped into a whole different world. Now you actually have to *think*. Now you have a project called "research gardeners" to see if you actually want to get one, and if so, how. Now, every time you walk out into your yard, you feel a certain pressure. That's the difference between "mow your yard" and "do I get a gardener?" Most people don't realize that this involves knowledge-work, and it takes real effort. It's the concrete moves of actually having to think. You have to actually sit down and think about what "done" means for this project, and you also have to decide what "doing" looks like. That's how you get things done: you define what "done" means and you decide what "doing" looks like. Neither one of those conclusions show up already pre-pared for you.

A lot of people, I'm guessing, handle these decisions by pushing them off to the side and trying to ignore them.

Most people finally decide what "doing" looks like and what "done" means in crisis. In fact, produc-tive behaviors actually show up in crisis. In a crisis you have focus, lack of distractions, you're highly engaged toward the desired outcome—*that's* high performance behavior. The problem is that it's coming out of fight/flight, your forebrain has shut down and you're not living with any kind of relaxed intelligence. Now you are living your life in a highly reactive, knee-jerking way. Most people, for example, make decisions about what to do with elder care for their parents when the heat forces them to, not when they first become aware that this is going to be an issue. So, the big paradigm shift required is this: learning to make decisions about capturing and clarifying stuff when it first comes to your attention as opposed to when the heat forces you to.

Is one of the things unique about modernity that we've made so many more commitments than in generations past?

Most people reading *Cutting Edge* have, in the last 72 hours, taken in more change-producing, project creating and priority-shifting information than their parents got in a month, some of them even in a year. The truth is that when things change, that impacts all of your projects and priorities. Most people haven't trained themselves to look around and ask, "Which priorities are now more important, and which projects do I now need to get rid of?" If they don't do that, it's a formula for blow-up. People simply have a limited capacity to manage a certain number of commitments. So what's different about modernity is that, first, a lot more input is coming at us that generates more potential commitments and, second, a great deal more of intense thinking is required to clarify how we want to respond to those commitments.

A lot of time management systems say that the key is getting a better big picture, or clari-fying your values, and that the appropriate responses will follow.

You *do* need to do those things. But those are not the only horizons. "My purpose is to serve God" is *not* going to help you with deciding which of the 2,000 emails you've got backed up should be answered first. It will help a little bit. It will help you define the vision you want to be fulfilling out there, which will help you define some objectives and goals you set to make sure you are express-ing your work for God, which is going to help you define the thirty to a hundred projects you actually have in the real world to make that happen, and *that's* going to help you a lot in finding the 160-200 next action steps you've got for any of those projects. But, by the way, how's your health? And how are your family relationships? And, by the way, how *is* the yard? And, oh, by the way….So, yes, knowing that you are serving God is at least going to give you the motivation to sit down and say, "Gee, I'm burning the toast and I'm yelling at my spouse, which doesn't seem like a Christian thing to do", which may turn you back around to say, "How then do I deal with this practically?" with some internal standards about quality of life. The most spiritual people I know are some of the most grounded, practical, get-it-done people on the planet.

For the person who is saying, "What you're talking about is exactly what I need to do," what are the basic tools he or she needs to start working with?

You need an in-basket and a pen and paper, so you can first of all capture all the stuff you commit to when you make the commitments. You need "capture-buckets" where you can capture these commitments in retrievable ways. That's because the most irretrievable place for filing something is in your brain. The mind retrieves things based on how recent it was and how much emotional con-tent you have tied to it, and that's a crappy way to run a filing system. Your head is for having ideas, not for holding them.

Everybody has felt themselves up against the wall where they have so many things in their head that they feel forced to sit down and make a list. If they actually understood why that helps, they'd never keep anything in their heads again! If you use your brain for filing, you end up not finishing things when you think of them. And the older you get, the ideas you have for what to do with your church aren't going to come to you at church; they are going to leak out at the beach, on the bus, and in other strange places. You need to have tools to capture ideas, commitments, things to do, things you then need to think about and decide what they mean.

You need to then train yourself—once you've learned to capture things in an in-basket or a list—to go down each one of these things and decide much more discreetly what exactly each one of those things means to you and what your commitments are about them. Is this item a crazy idea that you *might* want to do someday? Or is it something you are committed to move on right now? Is it trash? Is it reference material? This is

the point where you sit down and get more discreet about what things mean to you.

And you have to set aside blocks of time to do that.

For the typical professional these days, it takes somewhere between 30 to 90 minutes a day just to do that. It takes on average about half a minute per item to decide and organize. Then, once you've decided what to do with it, if you aren't going to act on it right then, you need to keep track of it somewhere. If I've decided I now need to make a call about my new gardener, but not right now, I need to have an organizing tool for keeping track of things like calls that have to wait until I am near a phone or have time.

The process of picking the thing up, deciding that the next step is to make a phone call, and then putting it into some list of phone calls to make—whether you type it into a category in Outlook, or write it on a page in a planner, or throw it into a file folder called "Calls to Make"—that takes about half a minute per item, if you average it all out.

But in some ways, you are still talking about something different than the person who has tried prioritizing things in their Daytimer.

Nearly every to-do list I've ever seen is usually nothing more than an incomplete list of still-unclear stuff. It's either attracting or repulsing you every time you look at it. The problem with most to-do lists is that you did not finish the *thinking*—so every time you look at it, you are reminded subliminally that you've got thinking to do that you haven't done yet. And all that does is stress you out even more! And the list is incomplete to begin with. So your head ends up being the only system you trust, and now you've got this extra thing out there that you trying to keep up but you are not really keeping it up, so it's out of date. And all it's doing is creating guilt and beating you up every time you look at it.

That's the problem. The problem is not the tool. The problem is that people are populating these tools with information that's incomplete, inconsistent, and only half thought-through. Therefore it's not a system. A system is complete, current and consistent. Every phone call you need to make in your life needs to be listed someplace you can see when you are at phone and have time. If you don't

have that, you don't have a system.

Most people don't worry about where they need to be and when because they trust that they can look at their calendar. The problem is that 95% of their life is not calendared! If they understood the principle they use with their calendar, they'd realize they could get everything else out of their head just like they got the stuff for their *calendar* out of their head, and put that information in a place they trust the same way they trust their calendar.

You mentioned in the book that one of the things you've done with some executives is just taken them out and buy them a good filing cabinet.

Yes. One of the first people I coached 25 years ago didn't even have a desk. He was one of these people who had such a low ego—he was a chiropractor running an alternative health clinic—that he didn't want to have an office because he didn't want people to think he had a Big Office. So he didn't have anyplace to even plop a piece of paper down. The first thing we did was buy him a desk, put some stakes in the ground and give him a place to sit down.

Do you find that when you consult with people, the surface level issues mean that you actually have to work with them at deeper levels in terms of what they want to be about, what they want to be doing?

Well, it all rolls downhill. Ultimately, if you don't care about what you are doing or you don't know why you are doing it, you will find every excuse in the world to avoid doing these things. If actually attempting to proactively manage your time and commitments is going to force you to deal with things that are closer to your soul, you may avoid it like the plague as well. Getting organized would force you to step up to that thing you need to do! The truth is that I am very behavioral, as a consultant. I say, "Hey, we don't have to deal with that if you don't want to." We work with work flow.

 Why are you on the planet? That's your primary work. Everyone has one project—to fulfill their destiny. That's your game, and ultimately until you get the answer to that and orient your life around it, you are going to have something gnawing at you. All of that is central to consult with people about, if they will look at it. But most people don't

have the bandwidth, the capacity, to work at that level. Vision will get you into the ballpark, but if you get your pant leg caught in the bicycle chain on the way in, you'll curse the vision that got you into the park! Somebody loves God, that's what got him involved in the church. But then when he feels like the world is being pulled out from under him, he may start blaming the wrong source.

Let me give a couple of scenarios. Someone is leading a church in the start-up stages. They don't have a team to delegate to; they are doing the marketing, the sweeping up, everything. What are some of the unique challenges that you work on with somebody who's doing that?

Well, they are wearing so many different kinds of hats that require very different kinds of personalities to engage with things. If your brain is still wrapped around the pennies your check register was off by, it's hard to go party and have your church social. The ability to be able to compartmentalize your work and define it and get control of it makes it a lot easier to switch hats real fast, which is what people in those stages have to do. If you carry one meeting into the next, or one role into the next, you are never fully available and engaged.

Another issue to deal with is, how do I make decisions about who to start to bringing in to help? How do you start to build support? You need to understand what your own weaknesses are and how to create your own system. The problem is that people often have such trouble delegating because they cannot manage their own systems and they won't give away anything they can't control.

How about pastors of large churches of 500 to 1,000 or more?

I don't think the issues are all that different, actually. Start-ups feel the issues more keenly because they are having to meet them so fast, presuming that the start up is successful. But in both cases you find yourself with a whole lot more to do than you can do, because each one of the things you

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are doing demands more of your time to do well.

You emphasize in *Getting Things Done* how important certain "tricks" are to making these things work. Are there certain tricks that turn the lights on for people again and again?

Well, the Two Minute Rule is worth its weight in gold. It says, any action you are ever going to take at all that will take less than two minutes, you should do the first time you see it, because it'll take you longer to track it and file it than it will take to just *do* it the first time it's in your face. If people get nothing more out of the book than that, they'll add an extra six months to their life!

It also gets people thinking, "Wow, how can I get closure on this?" Most people haven't trained themselves to get value out of closure. And yet everyone experiences the value of doing that. So training yourself to get quick closure on some things begins training you to think about that whole process more consciously. So it's not just the Two Minute Rule. It's learning to ask, "How can I get this off my plate?" It trains people, for instance, to throw out a lot more mail on the front end instead of dumping it on the counter. Just simple little things like that can change how folks approach their lives.

What are some of the most important ways of dealing with email?

The big thing there is to not let email pile up into this enormous blob in your in-basket without getting it reviewed and sorted in some way. You've got to make an executive decision about what exactly emails mean to you. Deleting the ones you can, filing the ones that you have no action step for but want to keep, handling the two-minute ones right away, will leave you with only two kinds of emails—ones that take longer than two minutes to read, negotiate and manage, and ones that represent something for which you are waiting for more input from somebody else. A quick way to manage that is to create two folders, one called Action and one called Waiting For, and file the remainder accordingly. That gets your in-box empty. The only problem with that is that people have never seen their in-box empty, and they get so excited that they never go back and open the actual folders called Action and Waiting For.

No trick is going to get rid of the necessity of going back and looking at stuff and making executive decisions about them, which people are often avoiding. But it makes it a lot easier to train yourself to use a system to sort things, so you are left with 16 emails that require *actual* work, and relieves you of having to keep re-opening, re-thinking and re-deciding the ones that don't.

Nothing is going to replace taking time to sit down and actually think.

Yep. I'm sorry, but hard thinking is required to get things done.

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

by David Allen

Ready For Anything: 52 Productivity Principles for Work and Life

by David Allen

One of the best websites on personal productivity and time management which incorporates much of the principles found in *Getting Things Done* is **www.43folders.com.**

For information about productivity seminars and executive coaching with David Allen, or to listen to audio interviews, visit his website at **www.davidco.com.**

THANK GOD FOR DAVID ALLEN!

By Jeff Cannell

I am by no means an organizationally gifted person. On my report cards growing up I often received comments regarding my disorganization. I have literally spent over 10 years intending to organize my back office at home.

For five years I served as a pastoral assistant at Vineyard Church Columbus where I could often be the greatest trial ever faced by the administrative staff. My creativity was inversely proportional to my organizational skills. When I was investigating whether or not I was called to church plant many had reservations about how I would find assistance in prioritizing and managing the ongoing projects associated with it.

Several months into the church plant I began to feel overwhelmed. I was visiting at VCC and a former colleague cornered me and told me that I had to read David Allen's book. He had read it himself and it led to a personal renaissance.

As a pastor one of my objectives is to help people see their life as a fully integrated life. Yet structurally most people try to organize their life by categorizing it into different sections. In this area I was perhaps the chief offender. This oftentimes results in differing and sometimes contradicting systems for home versus office organization. One of the many reasons I think Allen's book works is because it treats life as a unified whole. I spent

a week going through the initial exercises in the book and I felt like the scales of chaos were beginning to fall from my eyes. My countless to-do lists, random notes, ideas, dreams, and material for later review were formerly filed in an endless mishmash of milk-crates, Target Containers, and the abyss of my desk. Adrienne (my wife) sat in awe as she saw the endless debris transform into a simply organized file cabinet and a project matrix document residing on my powerbook desktop.

One of Allen's key points is that ideas bouncing around in the dark recesses of the brain stifle creativity and project completion. I spent several hours brainstorming to capture every idea and thought that was stuck in my head. By the end of the exercise I had a 10 page document with one sentence idea summaries. After that point I was able to realistically categorize the projects or dreams. My stress level has been greatly reduced. I think this book should be required Church Planter reading along with Wimber and Ladd.

In one week achieved more organization than in the countless combined hours of the previous decade— and embraced a system that actually works.

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links:

www.centralvineyard.com
www.jeffcannell.blogspot.com
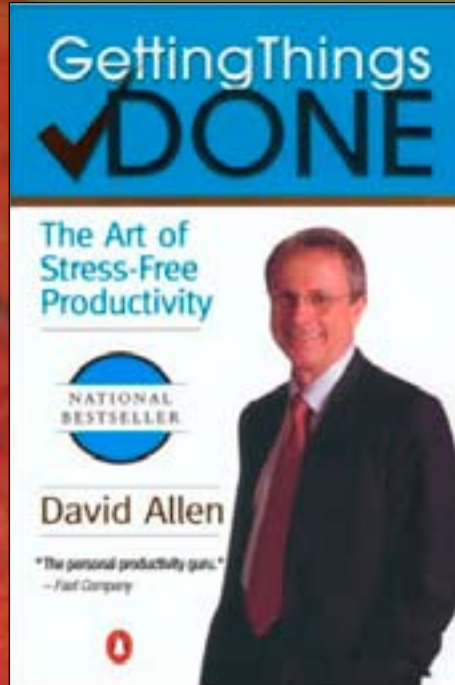
FORGET ABOUT THE GRIZZLY

By Jesse Wilson, Vineyard Church of Milan

Seven days to go in my first vacation as the neophyte pastor of a church that had launched 9 months earlier, and I was completely on edge. The return to the office loomed over me like a massive grizzly bear in the inky blackness ahead. It wasn't any one thing I was dreading; no particular relational issues, no nasty controversies, nothing of the sort. Just too many mundane things left undone that I knew I'd have to deal with, and no idea if or how I'd ever catch up. Not to mention this terrifying conviction that every day I stayed on vacation, to-do items were multiplying like caged bunnies. I felt vaguely out of control, in a hyperalert, non-medicated kind of way.

In the midst of half-heartedly wrestling with Jesus about cutting vacation short or trusting him to

take care of the church in my absence, I caught a glimpse of David Allen's book, Getting Things Done, on my bookshelf. A book I'd been wanting to read for a while, but just hadn't gotten to yet. I picked it up, opened to chapter one, and read the first sentence: "It's possible for a person to have an overwhelming number of things to do and still function productively with a clear head and a positive sense of relaxed control." A divine appointment with a sentence, if I've ever had one.

I've always been fairly organized, relatively speaking. In a techno-geek sort of way: exhaustively categorized email folders, PDA's and cell phone with synched contacts, appointments, task lists. But it didn't do diddly-squat to give me a clear head and a positive sense of relaxed control. At best, it was a kind of organizational due diligence. At worst, it highlighted to me how justified I was in feeling overwhelmed.

The GTD approach, on the other hand, has worked as advertised. Essentially, developing the discipline of deciding on and capturing next actions in an efficient and reliable system has the effect of freeing one's mind from the burden of juggling open loops, which it unconsciously spends time and energy fruitlessly trying to close. For me, it's paying off in all sorts of unexpected ways. In personal prayer, my mind has less internal white noise to deal with, and more readily directs my soul to God. When I'm with my wife and kids, disengaging from the busyness of the day is easier.   Sermon prep has improved, since I can give more attention to the Spirit's leading and spend less energy trying to reign in frenetic thoughts.

Pastoral work is still the same blend of the now and the not yet of the kingdom, of course. Paperwork is paperwork, people are people, the phone still rings at the worst times, and most projects still take twice as long to do as the time I've set aside to do them. But increasingly often, I forget all about the grizzly bear, and it's Jesus knocking at the door who's more likely to get my attention.

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