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**Essentialism by Greg McKeown**

The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials. – Lin Yutang. Remember this pertains to the physical and emotional essentials.

Evaluate requests made to you by asking “can I actually fulfill this request, given the time and resources I have? If no, refuse the request.

Next ask “is this the very most important thing I should be doing with my time and resources right now? No, don’t do it.

When you commit to doing only the things that are truly important, quality returns.

Only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your greatest contribution towards the things that really matter.

Think LESS BUT BETTER

In the world of activities – most are trivial and few are vital.

Energy diagram (left ineffective, right effective)

Essentialism is a disciplined, systematic approach for determining where our highest point of contribution lies, then making execution of those things almost effortless.

Be aware – there are too many forces conspiring to keep us from applying the disciplined pursuit of less but better.

Remember, if you don’t prioritize your time, someone else will.

Why is it that we have so much more ability inside of us then we often choose to utilize. And how can we make the choices that allow us to tap into more of the potential inside ourselves and in people everywhere?

In How the Might Fall by Jim Collins he explores what went wrong in companies that were once darling of Wall Street but later collapsed. He finds that for many, falling into the undisciplined pursuit of more was the key reason for failure.

Peter Drucker: 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.

Decision Fatigue – the more choices we are forced to make, the more the quality of our decisions deteriorates.

The word priority came into the English language in the 400’s. It was singular. We have made it plural.

Once an Australian nurse named Bronnie Ware, who cared for people in the last 12 weeks of their lives, recorded their most often discussed regrets. At the top of the list “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me”

Ask yourself – will this activity or effort make the highest possible contribution toward my goals?

Studies have found that we tend to value things we already own more highly than they are worth and thus that we find them more difficult to get rid of If you are not quite there, ask the killer question: If I didn’t already own this, how much would I spend to buy it?

**ESSENCE:**

**Chapter 2 – Choose**

If you could do only one thing with your life right now, what would you do?

When we surrender our ability to choose, something or someone else will step in to choose for us.

A choice is an action.

While we may not always have control over our options, we always have control over how we chose among them.

Options (things) can be taken away, while our core ability to choose (free will) cannot be. However it can be forgotten that we have the ability to choose.

We can have learned helplessness. Where we forget we have a choice.

I’ll be the first to admit that choices are hard. By definition they involve saying no to something or several “somethings” and that can feel like a loss.

To become an Essentialist requires a heightened awareness of our ability to choose.

William James wrote – my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.

The Essentialist knows that when we surrender our right to choose, we give others not just the power but also the explicit permission to choose for us.

**Chapter 3: Discern**

Working hard is important, but more effort does not necessarily yield more results. Less but better does.

At a certain point, more effort causes our progress to plateau and even stall.

Distinguish between the trivial many and the vital few.

Warren Buffet – decided early in his career it would be impossible for him to make hundreds of right investment decisions, so he decided that he would invest only in the businesses that he was absolutely sure of, and then bet heavily on them.

Certain efforts produce exponentially better results than others. Explore which efforts those are – and do them.

John Maxwell – you cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything.

Many capable people are kept from getting to the next level of contribution because they can’t let go of the belief that everything is important.

**Chapter 4: Trade-Offs**

You have to look at every opportunity and say “well no, I am sorry, we are not going to do a thousand different things that really won’t contribute much to the end result we are trying to achieve.”

Straddling – keeping your existing strategy intact while simultaneously also trying to adopt the strategy of a competitor. BAD.

Until we realize trade offs are important, we will continue to straddle the fence.

C Suite Executives are the worst at accepting the reality of trade offs.

We can try to avoid the reality of trade-offs but we cannot escape them.

As painful as they can sometimes be, trade-offs represent a significant opportunity. By forcing us to weigh both options and strategically select the best one for us, we significantly increase our chance of achieving the outcome we want.

Don’t look at trade-offs as “what do I have to give up”? Look at them as “what do I want to go big on”?

**EXPLORE:**

**Chapter 5: Escape**

We need space to escape in order to discern the essential few from the trivial many. Unfortunately, in our time-starved era we don’t get that space by default – only by design.

Create space to read, concentrate and design.

**Chapter 6: Look**

Essentialists are powerful observers and listeners. They read between the lines.

How to tap into your inner journalist:

1. Keep a journal. Keep it to the less but better model. Review it every 90 days.
2. Get out in the field.
3. Keep your eyes peeled for abnormal or unusual details
4. Clarify the question.

**Chapter 7: Play**

Make time for it at work.

Play leads to brain plasticity, adaptability, and creativity.

Play broadens the range of options available to us.

Plat is an antidote to stress, and this is key because stress, in addition to being an enemy of productivity, can actually shut down the creative, inquisitive, exploratory parts of our brain.

Play has a positive effect on the executive function of the brain (planning, prioritizing, scheduling, anticipating, delegating, deciding, analyzing).

Play doesn’t just help us to explore what is essential. It is essential in and of itself.

**Chapter 8: Sleep**

Protect the asset.

It is our highest asset, to get enough sleep – to be well – be able to prioritize.

**Chapter 9: Select**

90% Rule. As you evaluate an option, think about the single most important criterion for that decision, then simply give the option a score between 0 and 100. Anything below 90 is a no.

When our selection criteria are too broad, we will find ourselves committing to too many options. What’s more, assigning simple numerical values to our options forces us to make decisions consciously, logically and rationally, rather than impulsively or emotionally.

If it isn’t a clear yes, then it is a clear no.

Jim Collin’s in Good to Great reminds us – if there is one thing you are passionate about – and tht you can be best at – you should do just that one thing.

How?

1. Write down the opportunity
2. List 3 minimum criteria
3. List 3 extreme criteria
4. They must pass all 3 minimum and at least 2 extreme criteria for a yes

**ELIMINATE:**

How can we cut out the trivial many? It isn’t enough to simply determine which activities and efforts don’t make the best possible contribution; you still have to actively eliminate those that do not.

Studies show that we tend to value things we already onw more highly than they are worth.

Ask yourself, if I didn’t have this opportunity what would I do to acquire it?

Ask yourself, “what will I say no to today”

**Chapter 10: Clarify**

Eliminate nonessentials in order to ensure that you can pour your energy into the activities that are most meaningful to you.

Motivation and cooperation deteriorate when there is a lack of purpose.

What happens when teams lack clarity & purpose:

1. Playing politics – when they don’t know what the game is, they make up their own, play to beat other team members, etc.
2. It’s all good – team without purpose become leaderless. Without purpose people pursue short term self interest activities that don’t meet the overall end result of the mission.

Essential intent: inspirational and concrete. Meaningful and measurable. It guides your greater sense of purpose, and helps you chart your life’s path.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **General** | **Concrete** |
| Inspirational | Vision/Mission | Essential Intent |
| Bland | Values | Quarterly Objectives |

Crafting a purpose statement :

1. If we could be truly excellent at only one thing, what would it be
2. How will we know when we have succeeded?

**Chapter 11: Dare**

The deeper I have looked at the subject of Essentialism the more clearly I have seen courage as key to the process of elimination. Without courage, the disciplined pursuit of less is just lip service.

Anyone can talk about the importance of focusing on the things that matter most and many people do – but to see people who dare to live it is rare.

As hard as it can be to say no to someone, failing to do so can cause us to miss out on something far more important.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. – Stephen R. Covey

Why is it so hard in the moment to dare to choose what is essential over what is nonessential:

1. We are unclear about what is essential. In virtually every instance, clarity about what is essential fuels us with the strength to say no to the nonessentials.
2. Innate fear of social awkwardness

Nonessentials say yet in pursuit of the rush one gets from having pleased someone.

How do we learn to say no gracefully?

1. Separate the decision from the relationship
2. Saying no gracefully doesn’t have to mean using the word no
3. Focus on the trade off
4. Remind yourself that everyone is selling something
5. Make your peace with the fact that saying no often requires trading popularity for respect. Essentialists accept they cannot be popular with everyone all of the time.
6. Remember that a clear no can be more graceful than a vague or noncommittal yes.

8 Responses you can put in your “no” repertoire:

1. The awkward pause
2. The soft “no” or the “no butt”
3. Let me check my calendar and get back to you
4. Use e-mail bounce backs
5. Say “yes what should I deprioritize”
6. Say it with humor
7. Use words “you are welcome to X. I am willing to Y.”
8. “I can’t do it, but X might be interested”

Learn the slow “yes” and the quick “no”

**Chapter 12: Uncommit:**

Sunk cost bias is the tendency to continue to invest time, money, or energy into something we know is a losing proposition simply because we have already incurred, or sunk, a cost that cannot be recouped.

An Essentialists has the courage and confidence to admit his or her mistakes and uncommit, no matter the sunk costs.

Avoiding Commitment Traps:

1. Beware of the endowment effect – a sense of ownership in something makes it hard to give up.
2. Pretend you don’t own it – and ask what you would pay for it
3. Get over the fear of waste
4. Admit failure to begin success
5. Stop trying to force a fit
6. Get a neutral second opinion
7. Be aware of the status quo bias – the tendency to continue doing something simply because we have always done it
8. Stop making casual commitments
9. From now on, pause before you speak
10. Get over the fear of missing out
11. To fight this fear, run a reverse pilot – test whether removing an initiative or activity will have any negative consequences.

**Chapter 13: Edit:**

Editing involves the strict elimination of the trivial, unimportant, or irrelevant – is an Essentialist craft.

A good editor makes it hard not to see what’s important because she eliminates everything but the elements that absolutely need to be there.

Essentialists take on the role of editors in their lives and businesses.

An editor actually adds. A good editor is someone who uses deliberate subtraction to actually add life to the ideas, setting, plot and characters.

It increases your ability to focus on and give energy to the things that really matter. It lends the most meaningful relationships and activities more space to blossom.

Editors make life effortless.

The goal is to have the clearest possible understanding of the most important message or takeaway.

Editing also involves making trade offs.

4 simple principles in editing life or business:

1. Cut out options
   1. To write is human, to edit is divine
2. Condense
   1. Less waste.
   2. Lower the ratios of effort to results.
   3. We need to eliminate multiple meaningless activities and replace them with one meaningful activity.
3. Correct
   1. We must have a clear sense of the overarching purpose of the work.
   2. Make course corrections by returning to your purpose.
   3. Regularly compare your activities or behaviors to your real intent.
4. Edit less
   1. Waiting too long to edit will force you to make major cuts not always of your choosing.
   2. Editing your time and activities continuously allows you to make more minor but deliberate adjustments along the way.

**Chapter 14: Limit:**

No is a complete sentence – Anne Lamott

The disappearance of boundaries is typical of our nonessentialist era. Technology has completely blurred the lines between work and family.

Boundaries are a little like the walls of a sandcastle. The second we let one fall over, the rest of them come crashing down.

The boundaries of work have edged insidiously into the family territory.

Remember - Setting boundaries are hard and can come at a high price. However not pushing back costs more: our ability to choose what is most essential in life.

If you don’t set boundaries there won’t be any, or even worse, there will be boundaries, but they’ll be set by default – or by another person – instead of by design.

Essentialists recognize that boundaries protect their time from being hijacked and often free them from the burden of having to say no to things that further others’ objectives instead of their own. The know that clear boundaries allow them to proactively eliminate the demands and encumbrances from others that distract them from the true essentials.

How to set boundaries:

1. Don’t rob people of their problems.
   1. It enables them if you fix problems for people.
   2. Once you take away a problem for people, you have taken away their ability to solve it.
2. Boundaries are a source of liberation.
   1. When we don’t set clear boundaries in our lives we can end up imprisoned by the limits others have set for us.
3. Find your deal breakers.
   1. If you can’t articulate your boundaries to yourself and others it may be unrealistic to expect other people to respect them or even figuret them out.
   2. Finding your deal breakers – write down any time you feel violated or put upon by someone’s request.
4. Craft social contracts.
   1. Simply having an understanding up front about what you are trying to achieve and what your boundaries are with a team mate, co-worker, etc. can keep you from wasting each others time.

**EXECUTE**

Once you figure out which activities, projects, etc. to keep in your life you have to have a system in place so that executing becomes routine and effortless.

**Chapter 15: Buffer**

The reality is we live in an unpredictable world.

The only thing we can expect (with great certainty) is the unexpected. Therefore you can either wait for the moment and react t it or we can prepare. We can create a buffer.

A “buffer” can be defined literally as something that prevents two things from coming into contact and harming each other.

We get busy and distracted, and before we know it the project is due, the day of the big presentation has arrived – no matter how much extra tie we built in.

Remove a buffer and you will be left reacting to problems and results inevitably suffer.

The Essentialists looks ahead. She plans. She prepares for different contingencies. She expects the unexpected. She creates a buffer to prepare for the unforeseen, thus giving herself some wiggle room when things come up, as the inevitably do.

Our lives are only getting faster. It is as if we are driving one inch behind another car at one hundred miles an hour.

Tips to creating a buffer:

1. Use extreme preparation.
2. Add 50% to your time estimate
   1. Planning fallacy – underestimating how long a task will take
   2. We all do this – even if we have done a task before
   3. Often we actually know we can’t do things in the given time frame, but we don’t want to admit it to someone
   4. Adding time relieves stress
3. Conduct scenario planning
   1. We can apply questions to our own attempts by asking questions.
      1. What risks do you face on this project or with this discipline?
      2. What is the worst-case scenario?
      3. What would the social effects of this be?
      4. What would the financial impact of this be?
      5. How can you invest to reduce risks or strengthen financial or social resilience
   2. Your answer to question 5 (v) will point you to buffers.

**Chapter 16: Subtract:**

Constraints are the obstacles holding the whole system back.

Because the Nonessentialist is always reacting to crises rather than anticipating them, he is forced to apply quick-fix solutions.

Essentialists don’t default to Band-Aid solutions. Instead of looking for the most obvious or immediate obstacles, they look for the ones slowing down progress. They ask “What is getting in the way of achieving what is essential?”

The Essentialist simply makes a one-time investment in removing obstacles.

An Essentialist produces more – brings forth more- by removing more instead of doing more.

How to focus on the constraints or obstacles we need to remove:

1. Be clear abut the essential intent – we can’t know what obstacles to remove until we are clear on the desired outcome.
2. Identify the “slowest hiker”. What are all the obstacles standing between me and getting this done? OR What is keeping me from completing this?
3. Remove the obstacle – We must remove the obstacles one by one.

**Chapter 17: Progress:**

The Essentialist starts small and celebrates progress.

The Essentialist pursues small and simple wins in areas that are essential.

Research has shown that of all forms of human motivation the most effective one is progress. Why? Because a small concrete win creates momentum and affirms our faith in our further success.

The two primary internal motivators for people are achievement and recognition for achievement.

Making progress in meaningful work is motivating.

We need to start small and build momentum.

The best place to look is for small changes we could make in the things we do often.

Techniques to create systems:

1. Focus on minimal viable progress – done is better than perfect.
   1. Ask – “what is the smallest amount of progress that will be useful and valuable to the essential task we are trying to get done?”
2. Do the minimal viable preparation – start early and small.
   1. Ask – “what is the minimal amount I could do right now to prepare?”
3. Visually reward progress – the act of positively reinforcing our successes allows us to reap more enjoyment and satisfaction out of the process.

**Chapter 18: Flow:**

The way of the Nonessentials is to think the essentials only get done when they are forced.

The Essentialist designs a routine that makes achieving what you have identified as essential the default position.

The science behind it is this: When we repeatedly do a certain task the neurons, or nerve cells, make new connections through communicating gateways called “synapses.” With repetition, the connections strengthen and it becomes easier for the brain to activate them.

The right routines can enhance innovation and creativity by giving us the equivalent of an energy rebate.

How to discard useless routines that keep us locked in nonessential habits:

1. Overhaul your triggers. Habits are made of cues, routines, rewards
   1. Cues - a trigger that tells your brain to go into auto mode & which habit to use
   2. Routine – the physical or mental habit
   3. Reward – which helps the brain figure out if it is worth remembering
   4. Figure out the cue and associate it with something more essential
2. Create new triggers.
3. Do the most difficult thing first

If you get bored with routines, divide your days into themes. Mix up your routines.

Tackle your routines one by one. Improve the most essential one first.

**Chapter 19: Focus:**

W.I.N. – what’s important now.

To operate at your highest level of contribution requires that you deliberately tune in to what is important in the here and now.

Only in the here and now can we actually execute on the things that really matter.

Esstentialists don’t diffuse their efforst with distractions.

We can do two things at a time, but we can’t concentrate on two things at a time. Multi-tasking itself is not the enemy of Essentialism; pretending we can “multifocus” is.

How to live in the here and now:

1. Figure out what is most important right now. Write down all the things you think you need to do right now.
2. Get the future out of your head. Write down future items on a separate piece of paper.
3. Prioritize. Each list
4. The pause that refreshes. Stop, close your eyes, breath.

Journal moments in the day that you were able to just be. What triggered that moment? What brought you out of it? Continue to try and recreate those moments as often as possible.

**Chapter 20 – Be**

We can all purge our lives of the nonessential and embrace the way of the Essentialist – in our own ways, and in our own time and on our own scale. WE can all live a life not just of simplicity but of high contribution and meaning.

David Thoreau wrote “I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest thinks he must attend to in a day.”

The way of the Essentialist isn’t just about success; it is about living a life of meaning and purpose. When we look back on our careers and our lives, would we rather see a long laundry list of “accomplishments” that don’t really matter or just a few major accomplishments that have real meaning and significance?

As these ideas become emotionally true, they take on the power to change you.

Being an Essentialist means not being like anyone else. When other people are saying yes, you will find yourself saying no. When other people are doing, you will find yourself thinking. When other people are speaking, you will find yourself listening.

Becoming an Essentialist starts with a few deliberate choices, then grows into a lifestyle.