

## Chapter 4



# KNOWING WHAT THE **"RIGHT STUFF"** IS

The first step in learning to do less is to figure out what “the right stuff” is – the stuff that you’re going to invest your precious life into. Only you can know what “the right stuff” is for you. Others may be affected by the choices you make but – ultimately – you have to decide what’s right for you. And what’s right for you will be as unique as you are. As a loose distinction, it’s probably good to divide things up into “work” and “life” so we’ll look at each in turn.

Also, at the end of this chapter, we’ll talk in more detail about the two filters and what they are and do.

## **Work? A lot of it shouldn’t be done!**

In work, there’s usually no shortage of people telling you what to do, and no shortage of ways for them to tell you. Requests, direct orders, objectives, key results areas, balanced scorecards, goals, targets, meeting action items and god knows what else. So there shouldn’t be any great problem in work knowing what the right stuff is. Correct?

Er, well no actually.

Not quite true.

In fact, in my experience, not very true at all.

A friend of mine used to work for a big multinational bank. One day she told me she was being sent on a two-day training course on how to use the company’s new performance appraisal system. When she came back she told about the system. It was a web-based, 360 degree appraisal. Your objectives went into the system. Then, when appraisal time came round,

you appraised your boss, your boss appraised you. Your colleagues appraised you, you appraised your colleagues. Then all these appraisals were churned around, compared against the objectives and the answer came out – the answer to how your performance had been over the last twelve months.

Sometime after that again, my friend told me she was going to be having her annual appraisal.

“How are you going to do?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said.

I started laughing. I thought she was joking. When I saw that she wasn’t, I said, “But what about the performance appraisal system, 360 degrees, web-based –”

“Yes,” she said with a smile. “The fact is I don’t know if I’m going to be rated ‘meets expectations’ or ‘exceeds expectations’.” Clear objectives? ‘Fraid not.

There are many people that don’t really know what their objectives are. Not really. Oh sure they have things like, “Get the projects done” or “Keep the customers happy” or “Make the world a better place for little furry animals” but as we’ll see shortly, there is a big problem with objectives like these.

Here’s one I came across recently. Somebody told me that their key objective for the year was to “be the voice of the customer”.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Well, you know – to represent the customers’ interests on the projects.”

“Fair enough. So how will you know – when the end of the year comes that you’ve done a great job being the voice of the

customer? And perhaps more importantly, how will your boss know?"

Long silence.

Some objectives are as I've just described. Some, on the other hand, are like the following – objectives of one of the people (let's call him Charlie) in ETP, my training and consulting company. They are:

- Do 75 days in front of clients, i.e. delivering training or doing consulting.
- Meet a monthly sales target of € 30,000 per month.

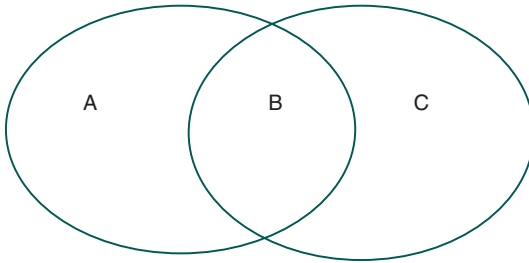
Can you see the difference? And can you see what the problem will be? In the second case, Charlie should only do things which contribute to one or other of his objectives. If something doesn't contribute to achieving the 75 days or the monthly sales target, then it absolutely shouldn't be done. Clearly Charlie would be nuts to do otherwise. Charlie knows with blinding, laser-like clarity what the right stuff is.

But in the first case – "be the voice of the customer" – who knows what the right stuff is? In this case, the person involved will work on certain things throughout the year. But are these *exactly* the same things that their boss reckons constitute being the voice of the customer? Highly unlikely, wouldn't you agree?

And this in turn means that you and your boss have two slightly (or could be very) different interpretations of what a good or a great performance would be. It's like this (not to scale) picture:

Your view

Your boss's view



What will happen then, is the following:

- You will spend some of your time doing the stuff in zone B. This is value-added work in the sense that it definitely makes a positive contribution to your end of year performance assessment.
- You will clearly spend time on the stuff in zone A since – in your view – this is stuff that definitely matters. In actual fact, this stuff is irrelevant and any time spent on it is wasted.
- You won't do the stuff in zone C – basically, because you don't know it has to be done. As a result of not doing this stuff you're pretty much guaranteed not to make your boss as happy as you might otherwise have done.

Look at what this means – you (in all probability) bust your ass – and for what?

When I teach this stuff to people I refer to it as “boxes”:



and “clouds”:



To know what the right stuff is at work, your objectives need to be boxes not clouds.

If your objectives are boxes, then fine and dandy. But what if they're not? What should you do then? Well, you need to go talk to your boss. And you need to have the conversation that begins with the words, "Hey boss, when the end of the year comes, how will we both know that I've done an amazing job?"

Before you do this, there's some preparation you would need to do. For those objectives of yours which are cloudy, you need to figure out some measures of them. These measures in turn, will make your clouds into boxes.

## REMOVE THE CHICKENSHIT FROM YOUR LIFE

If you've ever seen the miniseries, *Band of Brothers*<sup>9</sup> you'll remember from the first episode or two, the character Captain Sobel, played by David Schwimmer. In the book, *Band of Brothers*<sup>10</sup> Stephen Ambrose describes Sobel as "the classic chickenshit" and goes on to say, "he generated *maximum anxiety over matters of minimum significance*" [the italics are mine].

Paul Fussell in his book, *Wartime*<sup>11</sup> explains about chickenshit in the military. He says, "Chickenshit is so called – instead of horse- or bull- or elephant shit – because it is small-minded and ignoble and takes the trivial seriously."

Chickenshit isn't just confined to military. All of us have chickenshit in our lives – in work, absolutely, but also in our personal lives. All of us find ourselves taking "the trivial seriously" and "generating maximum anxiety over matters of minimum significance". The purpose of this book, and the power of doing less, is to remove most, if not all, of that chickenshit from your life. This chapter is a key step toward doing that.

I say that *you* need to do this because your boss almost definitely won't. Bosses have too much to do and not enough time to do it, just like everybody else – and so they're more than happy to go with the same old tired, cloudy objectives that have been passed along from one year to the next. So the chances are they won't make the first move. That means you have to. Propose some measures, go talk to your boss and either agree that your measures are okay or – even better – the pair of you, working together, come up with even better ones.

The result? You will now know what the right stuff is in work and you will be able to get that right stuff done, exceed expectations and all with the least amount of effort and wasted/misdirected time and energy.

And you'll also know what *doesn't* need to be done – and since we're interested in the power of doing less, this is what lights *our* fire. You are now saying that this stuff doesn't matter and it is never – and I repeat, never – going to be done. That feels good, doesn't it?



## Do Less – Figure Out What Matters In Work

- Start with any of your objectives that are fluffy, then replace them so that they can be boxes:

"Be the voice of the customer"

"Get input from a representative sample of at least 100 customers before finalizing the specification of any new product."

"Increase the accountability of Operations and reduce the need for QA second review and approval"

"Ensure that that the number of QA second reviews drops from x per week to y per week."

(Note too that it's okay to have more than one measure for an objective.)

- At this point all your objectives should be clear and measurable. Now look at them in turn. For the measures of each particular objective, what would you and your boss class as a good/acceptable performance? This is the performance level that your boss is expecting and would get you whatever promotion or rise you are chasing at the end of the year. For example, suppose you have a sales target of € 30K per month that has already been agreed; then that is the acceptable performance level. Now what would be a really extraordinary performance level? Maybe in the sales target example, it would be € 40K per month. And finally, what would be an off-the-scale performance level? Maybe that would be anything more than € 50K per month. Do this in turn for each of your objectives summarizing them in a little table thus:

Priority	Objective	Acceptable Level	Extraordinary Level	Off-the-scale Level
1	Monthly Sales target	30K	40K	50K
2	Get input from a representative sample of at least 100 customers before finalizing the specification of any new product			
3	Ensure that that the number of QA second reviews drops from x per week to y per week			
4				

*"It's not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?"*

- HENRY DAVID THOREAU, American philosopher

## Life? Don't miss it!

Did you ever think it would be great if you had some sort of Personal Life Objectives Fairy to tell you what to do with your personal life as well? Imagine it. Every year, on your birthday, this person would somehow show up and they would hand you your personal life objectives for the year ahead. Give up smoking. Join a gym. Spend more time with the kids. Get that guitar out of the attic and start practising again. And so on. Then they'd come back towards the end of the year and grade you. Met expectations. Exceeded expectations. Fired. Or whatever.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the Personal Life Objectives Fairy doesn't exist. You have to do that yourself.

So if you're unsure about what matters to you in life, then here's the quickest way to find out. (And after that there are some other ways that you can also try.)

## **Do Less – Find Out In Five Minutes**

### **What Really Matters To You**

1 Imagine you have somehow found out that you have exactly three months left to live. It's definitely true. There's no mistake. You're going to have 90 more days and then that's it. It'll be a wrap. Imagine it. *Really* imagine it.

2 Now give yourself five minutes (no more, no less) to make a list of all the things you would want to have or do or achieve or experience in those 90 days.

3 Now imagine you've been given a "get out" clause. Out of the list you've just made, if you can identify three things that you're prepared to put time into to make them happen, then you get to live until these three things are accomplished.

4 So identify those three things. Seems like these could well be the things that really matter to you.

Did you find that “Do Less” challenge difficult? If you did, you’re not alone. It can be trickier than you think to identify the things that matter most to you.

So here’s something else you can try. Imagine that you won the lottery. What would you do? The question is a cliché; the answers equally so. “I wouldn’t have to work anymore.” “I wouldn’t have to worry about money.” “I’d buy all this stuff – cars, houses, holidays, clothes . . .” “I’d never have to cook again.” And so on.

Okay, fair enough. But assuming you did win the lottery, you’re still going to have to find things to fill your days. After you’ve gotten up in the morning, *not* gone to work, checked your bank balance and seen the seven-digit figure there, surveyed your house, the cars in your garage and all your other “stuff”, after you’ve eaten the healthy and gorgeous breakfast that was cooked and served up to you by your personal chef . . . what are you going to do then?

Knowing what you want to do with your life isn't something that everyone automatically knows. Some people do. I'm lucky enough to be one of them, for instance. For the last 30 years, consistently and without interruption I have wanted to be a writer. In fact, I have wanted to be a novelist. These days I spend some of my time doing that and I spend a lot of time writing. If I were to win the lottery, I probably wouldn't fill my days too differently from the way I fill them at the moment. There would probably be more writing fiction and less of the other kinds of writing. I might buy a new car but I'd be more likely to get my 1998 Saab Convertible fixed and back on the road. I might take a few more holidays/trips because I like travelling, and I might eat out a bit more, because I like food, and I'd definitely give more to charity but, other than that, I'm pretty happy that I have figured out what constitutes "the right stuff" for me.

Have you?

Because it's bloody important! It's clearly important in our working lives. But it's even more important in our lives generally. Life's not a rehearsal is a well-known saying. And indeed it's not. You get one crack at it.

So given that we only get one crack at it, we'd better make sure that we end up with the life we wanted and not some life that we feel was forced on us in some way or one that just sort of . . . well, happened to us.

Maybe you already know what life you want and if you do, that's great. But if you don't or you feel you've lost sight of it, then, apart from what we just did, there is a whole bunch of other ways to do it.

*Basil Fawlty<sup>12</sup> puts it well:*

*"Zoom! – what was that? That was your life, mate. That was quick, do I get another? Sorry mate, that's your lot."*



## How would you like to spend your time?

It has always seemed to me that how somebody wants to spend their days and weeks and months is the best way of figuring out what they really want. If you can describe your ideal day, week, month or year, then you are a long way towards figuring out what you really want – what “the right stuff” is for you. So how are you going to do that? Take a look through the questions that follow and see where they take you.

Write down your answers or anything else that occurs to you.

Where would you be living?  
With whom?

How much money  
would you have in  
your bank account?

What sort of house would  
you be living in?

Would you be working at all?

If you weren't working what  
would you be doing?

Would you have a  
commute to do or would  
you be working from where  
you live?

If you were working, where  
would you be working?

Who would you be  
working with?

How much money would you  
have in your bank account?

What would you  
be doing?

Would you be healthy?

What role would you have?



What things would you buy?

What type of things  
would fill your day?

How would you know when  
you'd done enough work?

Would weekdays be the  
same as weekend days?

How would you spend a  
typical evening?

Would you look forward  
to Mondays – or at least,  
not mind them?

Would you cook or  
go out to dinner?

How would you spend  
the weekend?

Would you be sorry to finish  
work on a Friday because  
you'd liked it so much?

Would you have more leisure time or  
"quality time" (with children or family or  
friends, say) than you do at the moment?

Would you be busier than you  
are at the moment? Quieter?

Would you be taking  
more holidays than you  
take now? If so, how  
much?

Are there people who  
are doing now what  
you'd like to be doing?

## **Do Less – Morph The Picture**

So having answered these questions, you have a picture of how you would like life to be. There are things that exist now that you don't see in this new life picture. Look back over the notes you made and list what they are.

For instance, maybe you currently commute to work and in your new life you don't. Maybe there are people in your life now that aren't in the new picture. Maybe there is work you do now that doesn't appear at all in the new picture.

These things that don't exist in your "new life picture" are the things you need to do less of until eventually they disappear altogether. Write down what they are. These should be the first things that you target when it comes to the next part of the book.

## SOME OTHER RESOURCES

As well as doing the things above, there are five other resources that I would highly recommend. Four are books which, if you want to:

- discover what your passion is
- start a business
- get the perfect job or make a career change
- change your life,

will do it for you. Respectively they are:

- *The Passion Test: The Effortless Path to Discovering Your Destiny*<sup>13</sup>
- *Wake Up and Change Your Life*<sup>14</sup>
- *What Colour Is Your Parachute*<sup>15</sup>
- *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!*<sup>16</sup>

And if you're *really* serious about starting a business – and can afford it (and maybe even if you can't) – check out Marie Forleo's B-School: <http://rhhbschool.com/>.

## **Do Less – Figure Out What “The Right Stuff” Is For You**

Be sure you don't leave this chapter without having *done* at least one of the things I suggested in the previous box. Not just read about them but *done* one.

## **The filters again**

Hopefully by now, you should be really clear on what “the right stuff” is for you. Now, all you need are the “filters” we spoke about and you can start to get rid of all the stuff that isn't “the right stuff”. Imagine how enjoyable that's going to be.

So clearly, we need a filter to decide what we're going to do and what we're not going to do. Furthermore, for the things we decide *not* to do, we have to have a way of “killing” them. If we can't do that then they will keep bobbing around and tormenting us. Both of these things make up this first filter.

And then, for the things we *do* decide to do, we want to do them with the least amount of effort – by which we mean as efficiently as possible with minimum firefighting and nasty surprises. We call this “doing things on your own terms”.

Here they are then – the two filters:

- 1 One to determine what to do and what not to do – and as part of that, to “kill” the things we decide not to do
- 2 One to get the things we do decide to do, done on our terms.

These in turn, will enable us to do “the right stuff”. Problem solved.

The filters are described in the next part of the book so let’s go. Oh and here’s a “Do Less” to keep you entertained today.

### **Do Less – Did You Do “The Right Stuff”?**

Today, at the end of your day, look at things that you actually got done. Do you think they were “the right stuff”? If not, why did you do them? And next time out, what would you do differently to avoid doing them?

Spend a little bit of time on this. It would be good to write down your thoughts.

“The key is not  
to prioritize  
what’s on your  
schedule, but  
to schedule  
your priorities.”

[ – STEPHEN COVEY, Motivational author  
and speaker ]