Chapter 6

FILTER TWO –
DOING IT ON
YOUR TERMS

We spoke about liberation early on in the book. I hope you can see how filter #1, To Do or Not To Do, delivers that liberation to you. Every time you say "no" to something that doesn't matter, you free up time for the things that really do.

Apart from the extra time you're finding every day, you should now also be feeling (or rediscovering) some new feelings. For one, you should be experiencing a greater sense of clarity. Before, it may have seemed like there was just one great big list of stuff that you had to slog away at in the hope of clearing it. Now, you see that some things matter hugely and lots of stuff is actually irrelevant. And every time you invest time in, and progress, something that matters hugely, you are – in a very real sense – living the life you are meant to live.

In work you should be experiencing a new sense of job satisfaction and creative freedom. You're getting to spend time on the things that count and doing them really well. You're getting time to draw breath, to think, to be creative. You've rid yourself of the useless and pointless to focus on what your job is really all about. You're delivering a far better performance for the hours you invest – you're getting maximum "bang for the buck". And this should be noticeable to you, your boss and the other people with whom you deal.

In your personal life, you should be feeling that this is much more how you wanted your life to be. Some people report a feeling of "it doesn't get any better than this" at this point.

So you can see that while, at first glance, this filter may seem very simple, it does, in fact, give you immense power. And if this book were to somehow end right now, you would have everything you needed to make huge changes in your life.

But we're not finished yet. We have one more weapon in our arsenal. And this one is a real zinger. It's going to ensure that when you do something, you do it:

- As efficiently as possible.
- With the least amount of wasted time, effort, energy, resources, money.
- With as few nasty surprises as possible.
- With minimum firefighting.
- And with minimum stress.

We call it "Getting Things Done on Your Own Terms".
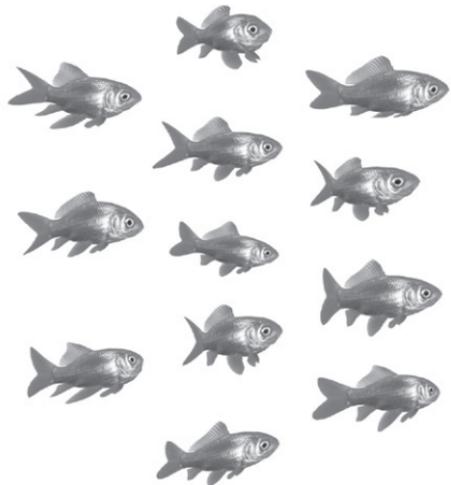
WAIT UNTIL THE BASS BITE

Many anglers think that by moving the bait around, by being "active", they increase their chances of catching something. However, if you want to catch bass, the best way is by "dead sticking". Dead sticking quite simply involves casting the bait into the water and then letting it sit there . . . and sit there . . . and sit there. Frustrated anglers thrash about without making a catch. But the wise angler lets his lure sink to the bottom and allows the line to go slack. The angler then has nothing to do but wait until the bass bite.

Getting things done on your own terms

Let's look first at the things you can get asked to do – the "requests" that come to you. In work, they can range from "Would you mind taking care of this little thing?" right up to "I'd like you to run the X Project". But whether it's a tiny thing or a full-scale, cast of thousands project, that request almost always comes packaged with some constraints.

Constraints are things like "I need this by four o' clock today" or "I'm giving you the X Project. The budget's already been fixed at two million and you're going to have to do it with your existing team" or "The scope of this project has been agreed with the customer and the date Sales gave them was 30 September". You know the kind of thing.

It's fair to say too that these constraints may be self-imposed. In work, there may be a culture of "we can't say no", which you feel pressurized by. Outside of work, you may feel certain obligations to march to somebody else's tune – to do things that "they" want you to do.

The first thing you have to realize is that you don't need to agree to these constraints. This is especially true at work. If you do agree and the constraints turn out to be impossible to achieve, you're going to end up in a hell of a mess. You'll work nights, weekends, cancel holidays, you'll be stressed and work will be consuming all your time. Not only that, you may do all of the preceding and still find that the constraints were impossible to deliver. A huge expenditure of money, resources, time, energy, stress and your time – and for nothing. In short, the very opposite of what we're trying to achieve with this book.

So here's a piece of advice. Stop treating these constraints as though they came from God. Because this is exactly what we

do. In work especially. We're told something like, "I want it by four o'clock today" or "It has to be done by the end of the quarter" and we treat these requests as though it had almost religious significance. So stop thinking of them like that. Think of them instead as a letter to Santa Claus.

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To explain: We've all written letters to Santa Claus, where we've said, "Dear Santa, this is the stuff I would really like for Christmas". But how many times have we come scampering down on Christmas morning to find that we got some things but didn't get others? Because the world simply isn't like this, one where we can say "This is what we want" and it just happens.

The world of work is no different. Yes, our bosses or other people may want certain things. Yes, there may be perfectly good business reasons why they do want those things. But if the things they're asking for can't be achieved, we need to tell them that and then tell them then what *can* be achieved.

And all of the preceding applies in our personal lives as well. Yes, there may be things we want to achieve – move to a different house, buy a new car, go on a holiday to some place we've always wanted to go to, start our own business – and we will have set our own constraints on those. But again we need to know whether or not these constraints are achievable.

Maybe, for example, you've always wanted to start a business but you feel that without a lump of capital to start out with, you can't do it. However, today more than ever, the barriers to start-

ing a business are low indeed. Many businesses – especially online ones – can be started with a derisory amount of money. (I started my business with a € 50,000 *debt*! While I'm not recommending this (!) it does show that self-imposed constraints – also known as limiting beliefs – can often be made to fade away.)

The way we're going to do things on our own terms is by building a plan, agreeing it with whoever we need to agree it with and then executing the plan.

Maybe, some time in your life, you've heard somebody say "We don't have time to plan it, just do it". This is always the wrong thing to say. If you don't build a plan you will spend/ waste more time, effort, resources and money in getting the project done – sometimes vast amounts of these things. Filter #2 essentially says that a little planning always beats a lot of firefighting.

And in case phrases like "spending all our time planning", "we can't plan for every tiny eventuality", "if we spend all our time planning, we won't have any time left do the project", "paralysis by analysis" and similar are starting to jump around in your head, don't worry. We're not talking about ridiculous levels of planning. Rather, it's about just enough to make sure you don't end up making rash decisions and commitments and getting yourself in a mess.

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Why is planning such a good idea?

Imagine this. It's about six o'clock in the evening and you suddenly realize you're hungry and you decide to cook dinner. Imagine then you do the following:

1 Light the gas ring.

2 Look in the fridge to see if there is something to cook.

3 You find there's nothing that you like there, so you decide to head down to the supermarket. Hopefully, you turn off the gas ring before you go.

4 You return with some eggs. You're going to make an omelette.

5 You light the gas ring again.

6 Where's the frying pan? Uh oh, it's in the dishwasher and the dishwasher is part way through its cycle. Okay, let's wait until the cycle is over. Turn off the gas again.

7 Finally the dishwasher cycle is over and you starting cooking your omelette. But then you think "It'd be really nice to have some fried potatoes with the omelette". But, oh hell, you should have done the potatoes first because they take longer than the omelette.

8 You finish the omelette and put it in the oven to keep it warm. You start on the potatoes. You're going to have a can of mushy peas with them and happily, you have both the potatoes and the mushy peas.

But mid way through frying the potatoes, you change your mind. Wouldn't asparagus be really nice instead of mushy peas? Back down the store again.

And so on . . .

And of course nobody, except perhaps Mr Bean, would do this. Instead we do some organizing first. We make sure we have the ingredients and the equipment necessary to cook them. We also make sure we have a recipe – either in our heads or from a book. This recipe tells us what must happen in what order. With this organizing done, our cooking should go relatively smoothly. Our dinner should be ready in the shortest time and we shouldn't have too many things go wrong.

In the first scenario, you'd probably be lucky if you ate dinner at all that evening. And that approach would definitely have cost you more in terms of time, effort, energy, money and general overall stress.

And I don't know what your experience has been but mine has been that many, many work and home-related projects get done exactly like the cooking-the-omelette scenario. Rather than build a plan, people just launch into the project and the results are often disastrous.

So that is why we plan.

How do we plan?

Whether in work or in life generally it all begins with a request to do some project or other. That request may come from other people or it may be initiated by ourselves.

With other people, it's often things like "Can you do this thing for me" or "I'm giving you the X Project" – and by the way, here are the constraints. Typical constraints are:

■ The time or date by which it must be done.
■ The budget.
■ Restrictions on resourcing/manpower.
■ The scale of the thing has already been decided.
■ Or some combination of these things.

If the request was initiated by ourselves then we set the con-straints ourselves. For example, we might decide that we want to get the house redecorated in time for Christmas or put down a patio or lawn before the summer comes.

And we mentioned already how some constraints can act as limiting beliefs. Limiting beliefs are really bad news since they

can severely hamper our ability to live the life we want to live. While dealing with such beliefs is outside the scope of this book, you don't necessarily need a therapist to help you get past such beliefs. Planning can provide a simple and massively effective way to do so.

When the request comes in, instead of launching straight into it, we need to carve ourselves out a little bit of time to do some planning. Think of a project as being like a journey to a destination. The destination is the goal of the project; the plan is the map of how we intend to make the journey.

So we need to figure out the goal (the destination) – and the plan (the map).
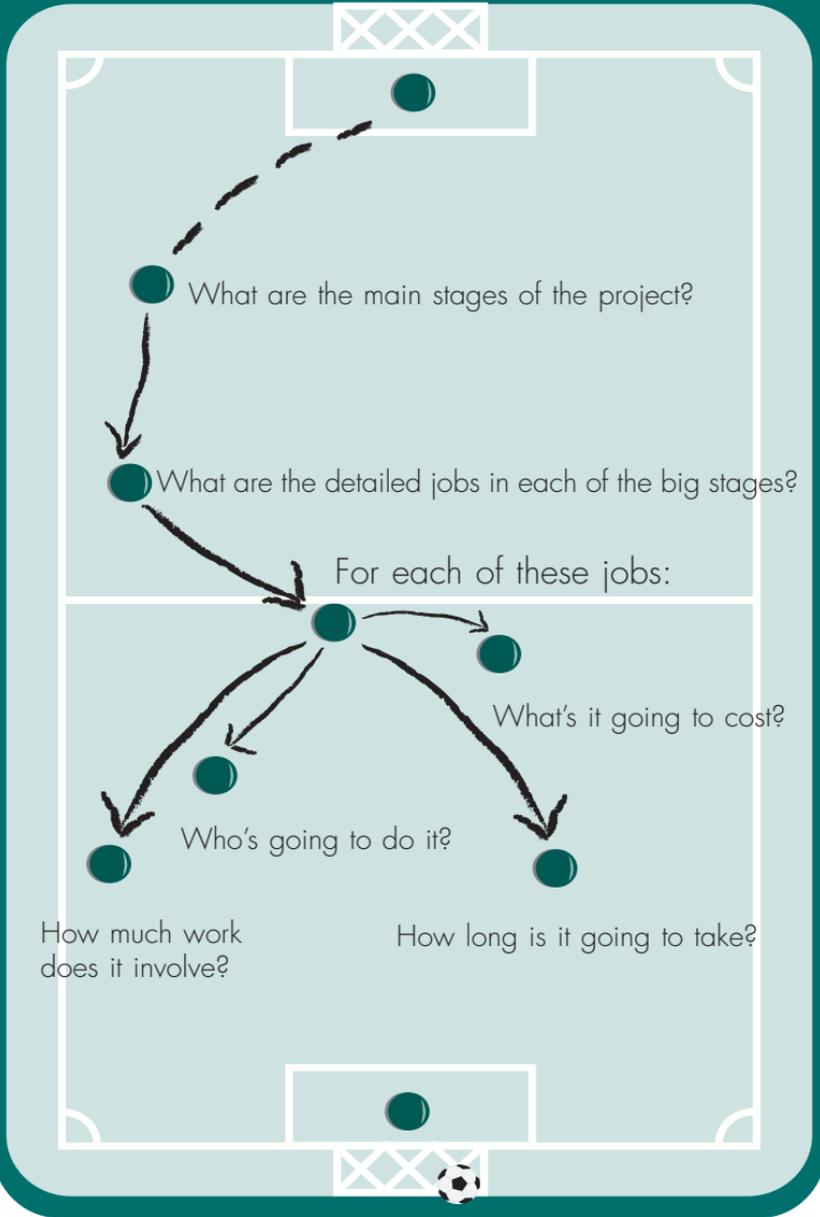
The goal
(the destination)

What exactly are you trying to do and how will you know when you're done?

Who's affected by the project and what do they hope to get from it?

The plan
(the map)

What are the main stages of the project?

What are the detailed jobs in each of the big stages?

For each of these jobs:

What's it going to cost?

Who's going to do it?

How much work does it involve?

How long is it going to take?

Now you'll be able to see quite clearly, if the constraints (whether imposed by somebody else or self-imposed) are achievable or not. If they are, that's great, agree to them and go for it, i.e. execute your plan.

If the constraints aren't achievable then explain/realize what is achievable – and go for that.

In my experience, the number one reason projects fail is that they were never actually possible in the first place. Somebody came up with some constraints and everybody just said, "Sure" or "Okay". The result can often be a catastrophe of broken promises and broken team members. The journey takes the wildest detours imaginable and sometimes, even after all that, never arrives at the destination. Or it arrives at a destination that wasn't in any way where anybody wanted to end up. (Really, the only time you should ever say the word "sure" is if you're buying deodorant!)

By building a plan, you can see very quickly whether the constraints have any basis in reality or not. As a result, you end up committing to something that's doable – a game that you have some chance of winning – as opposed to a game that you never had any chance of winning. Not only that, you get to the destination by the quickest, most efficient and safest route possible.

One final point. This isn't quite all you need to know about planning projects. There's a little but more to it than this – though not much, it has to be said. If you want the full skinny, check out *What You Need To Know About Project Management.*[19]

Do Less – Plan a Project

Take some small request that comes in to you today and plan it as described earlier.

First, figure out the goal/destination – how will you know when the project is over? Who are all the people affected by it? What do they hope to get from it? What would be a good outcome for them?

Then write down the steps in the plan/journey.

Don't cut any corners. Do the plan completely, writing it all down. (Note that this is no big deal. It should only take a matter of minutes to do the plan for a small request.) Then ask yourself whether you found out anything useful by doing this – something you wouldn't have discovered if you had just gone ahead and done the thing.

"If you believe that feeling bad or worrying long enough will change a past or future event, then you are residing on another planet with a different reality system."

[– WAYNE DYER, *Your Erroneous Zones*]