# Dealing with Stuff

# *The Straighten Up! 4-Point Strategy*

# ***Square***

# Provide minimal structure to make the whole job less overwhelming

(5 minutes)

Give stuff hard edges by making discrete, square piles

Stand books vertically on shelves, not horizontally

Put miscellany in a container

# Identify *The Power Pile* where your work will make the most difference

# ***Sample***

Get the maximum benefit from the minimum effort

(10 minutes)

Sort a random sample from *The Power Pile* into *Like with Like* categories

# Set up *Staging* or *Storing* areas for each category of stuff using the catchphrases *Active or Archive* and *Move It Along*

# ***Short Sessions***

Develop alternatives to all-or-nothing-at-all

(15 minutes each)

Sort, beginning with *The Power Pile*

Feed into *Staging/Storing* areas

Identify *Shedding* criteria

# *Close down* each short session to let change register

# Re-strategize as needed

# ***Stop***

Allow time to disengage from the work and get back to neutral gear

(5-10 minutes)

Stash the remaining backlog to chip away at later

*Square* everything up, distribute into *staging/storing* areas

*Close down* to let the changes REALLY sink in

Sorting and Staging

# *Sorting* gathers Like-with-Like

Choose a pile of papers that's in the way

* physically -- it may be taking up prime real estate in the middle of your desk
* visually -- it may be the first thing you see when you enter your area
* emotionally -- it may have important things in it that you've been avoiding

Lay out the papers, one at a time, putting similar items together. You don't need to know what your categories are before you start. In fact, it's better if you let the material take its own shape. Expect uncertainty at first. Before long the papers will find their own *Like-with-Like* piles.

When it's not obvious where it should go, put it into the "I Don't Know What To Do With This" pile. Deciding what to do takes you off sorting; having an "I Don't Know" pile helps you keep at it. You can decide later.

Your stuff will take its own shape of task, time, importance, and subject categories

* task categories like *Filing, Reading, Bills to Pay*
* time categories like *Today's Work, Next Week, Later*
* importance categories like *Must Do, Whenever*
* subject categories like *XYZ Project, Administrative Memos, Conversion Tables*

Most people have 6-20 categories. With fewer, your distinctions may be too gross to be workable; with more, your distinctions may be too fine. Piles that are significantly larger than the others often need a second-level sort. List your categories on the reverse.

# *Staging* sets up active areas; *Storing* sets up archive areas

Most people have places where stuff comes in like in-boxes (or the kitchen counter) and places where stuff goes out, like filing cabinets and the trash. What they usually lack are adequate physical tools and areas to accommodate the ‘stuff-in-transit’ between In and Out. Staging provides places to temporarily 'park' things on their way through the system.

When staging and storing, ask whether the stuff is Active or Archive. Frequently used stuff should be close at hand; stuff used less often, further away. Staging helps move things along. For instance, a folder for data entry near the computer moves stuff to where it’s processed. Stuff to be filed can be staged on top of the filing cabinet. Mail on its way out can be staged near the door. Make sure your staging and storing tools are appropriate and inviting. List staging/storing areas and tools for each category with *Active or Archive* and *Move It Along* in mind.

Category Staging/Storing area/tool

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Shedding --Yes/No/Maybe

Take about 6 items — from your Stuff-to-Shed. Lay them out so you can see each one.

Identify one item in the sample that you’d most likely keep — put that on your right. Identify one item that you’d most like to throw away — put that on your left. You have now defined the poles of your what-to-keep/what-to-toss scale. (Switch right/left if you’re left-handed.)

Compare each remaining item in the sample, one at a time, to those at the poles, arranging them within the scale. There may be some you clearly want to keep, others you clearly want to toss, and several that fall somewhere in the middle.

For the items at the poles, ask yourself, what about this item makes me want to toss it? what about this item makes me want to keep it? Toss criteria could be: *out of date, wrong color, broken, I’ll never do that, I only need one of these*. Keep criteria could be: *a memento of dear Tom, tax record, I’ll do it this year*. There is no right way to do this; your criteria are unique, none better than others. List your criteria below:

Criteria for tossing (the No’s):

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Criteria for keeping (the Yes’s):

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Bring other items into your scale, comparing as you go. Take as much or as little time as you choose. Most people end up with 20% Yes’s, 20% No’s and 60% Maybe’s. Capture any further Yes or No criteria.

Get rid of all the No’s. Put the Yes’s in the very best place. Put the Maybe’s in rough storage (the back bedroom, attic, etc.), labeled with the date processed and a general description, e.g., “5/7/01 -- College Notes Maybes,” and let them age for a while. As you do more Shedding your criteria become clearer; it will then be easier to decide.

Sustaining -- What are my maintenance tasks?

The trick in staying organized is to spend as much time as you need, but no more. Observe how long/how often you do maintenance tasks. If you spend too much time, propose a step down, making sure your physical support systems are in place. If you spend too little time, step up the frequency and/or time spent by just a little. The goal is Optimum Minimal Maintenance.

Maintenance Tasks how long, how often\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

(add your own as needed) (note actual, propose optimum)

***Regular maintenance***

Sorting mail/in box.............................................................................................................

Reading memos, correspondence, Email ............................................................................

Reading professional journals, etc. ...................................................................................

Responding to communications .........................................................................................

Passing it on ......................................................................................................................

Processing bills, paper, reports, etc. ...................................................................................

Copying ............................................................................................................................

Filing ................................................................................................................................

Calendar, scheduling, to-do planning .................................................................................

Deciding ...........................................................................................................................

Throwing away..................................................................................................................

Revisit Later/Much Later piles ..........................................................................................

***Work-in-progress and occasional tasks, as-needed***

Project review/set-up ........................................................................................................

Delegating ........................................................................................................................

Deciding ...........................................................................................................................

Archiving ..........................................................................................................................

Making new files ...............................................................................................................

Throwing away .................................................................................................................

***Less frequent tasks***

Major purging ...................................................................................................................

Setting up/revamping systems (address book, files, etc.) ....................................................

Getting supplies and tools ................................................................................................

Life planning/major decision-making .................................................................................

*Straighten Up! Catchphrases*

*Active or Archive* – The more you use it, the closer it is; the less, the farther away.

*Close down* – Take time to let accomplishments sink in. If you focus on what’s left to do, you’re discouraged. Focus on what you’ve done for continual encouragement.

*Like with Like* – Sort stuff by how you think of it and/or use it – by task, subject, importance, or timing – whatever makes sense to you.

*Move It Along* – Stage stuff on the way to its final destination.

*The Power Pile* – Stuff that takes energy to move or ignore (even subconsciously) will give maximum benefit when you work through it; you’ll notice the difference.

*Sample* – 40 to 80% of all your categories show up in a small sample of miscellaneous papers. Sampling gives maximum benefit with minimum effort.

*Shedding Criteria* – What allows me to confidently get rid of this item (out of date, a duplicate, irrelevant, etc.)? Clarify the criteria to make shedding easier.

*Staging* – Use staging tools to establish places for stuff to hang out as it makes its way through your system. “Only handle it once” doesn’t work anymore.

*Storing* – Store stuff where you use it based on *Active or Archive*. If it’s over and done with, store it far away – the older, the farther.