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Columnist

Professional Development

One bite at a time

You've heard the expression, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." I don't know why anyone would want to eat an elephant, but it *is* a good analogy for those times when we feel overwhelmed with so much to do and don't know where to begin. Sometimes we don't do anything, or don't do it well.

This was something I decided to work on with my coach. She suggested I create a daily "Next Step Form." This idea may help you, too.

Create a table with two columns. The left column is the name of the task, project, or area you need to work on. The right column is the next (or first) step you need to take to begin or complete the task.

Here are some items I have in my task column: Coaching, Columns, Professional Development, Promise to send/do, Marketing, Sales, Speaking, Thank you to:, Networking follow up, and Book Sales to name a few.

My biggest project at the moment is getting ready for a news conference I've scheduled to announce the results of the Hiring Study I did that assessed the behavioral styles and values of upstate business men and women. So, I created a separate Next Step table just for that project, since there are so many things that need to be done soon.

Each day I open my Next Step form on my computer, delete the steps I've taken, and then write what one thing to do next for each category. Obviously, some of them carry over from day to day. But I can still see them and I will either act on them or decide I don't need to and eliminate them.

At the bottom of the list, I enter the date and a line that says, "# of Items Done Today ____." I check off each step as I take it and at the end of the workday I count my check marks and write the number in the blank. I can't tell you how good it feels to see how much I get done each day. Before I started doing this, I'd feel like I'd worked hard all day but wondered what I'd accomplished. Now I know, and it inspires me to get even more done the next day.

I don't include appointments and meetings on my Next Step form; they go in my day planner and computer. I do include calls I need to make and letters or emails I need to send.

I don't think of this as a To Do list, or at least I feel it's a glorified, detailed To Do list. A To Do list is general; the Next Step list is specific. If I write a To Do list that includes "Book Sales," for example, I might waste energy trying to figure out what to do next. The list forces me to prioritize and decide what's the most important step to take now. I don't worry about the rest of it. If I want to take more than one step on a project each day, I can. Or not.

What this system has done for me goes beyond giving me a sense of accomplishment. It helps me to get started on a project I've been procrastinating about because it seemed so huge. It helps me to prioritize my activities, which is important for success in any endeavor. It also lets me be my free, spontaneous self in that I can choose each day which steps to take on which projects. I'm not chained to a list of things that have to be done in a rigid order.

I will say that I don't print out my Next Step form every day. If I'm working on a project and decide to do nothing else all day, then I have the form of steps for that task and don't worry about the rest. But the Next Step form is in my computer, so I can check it to see if there's something perhaps more or equally important that I should be doing.

If you decide to try this system, I caution you not to feel overwhelmed at the size of the list. I've written a lot of ideas and plans I have for my business. If I were to look at it each day and feel like I had to do all of them, I'd be back on overwhelm, being attacked by a *herd* of elephants. So, I caution you to look at the form as a book, with each item a chapter of the book. You wouldn't try to read the Bible in a day, would you?

Be pleased with what you accomplish each day and don't chastise yourself for the items you didn't check off. Tomorrow is another day.

So now I get to check off "column written." Until next time.

Before I do that, I'd like to thank *The Easley Progress* and all of you readers for helping me achieve a recent success. I won a 2004 Matrix Award from Women in Communications for some of the columns I wrote last year. I won in the category of "Best Newspaper Regular Non-Opinion/Informative Column, Non-Daily."

Thank you all for making that possible.

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