



chapter 7

DAVID ALLEN on Increasing Personal Productivity

Early in his career, David Allen held many different jobs – from teaching karate to managing an auto repair shop to starting a travel agency. Then he discovered and pursued his true passion: education and teaching. Today, David Allen is known as one of the world’s most influential thinkers on personal productivity. He offers seminars, books and unique advice on how to keep up with today’s fast pace. He is the author of two books: Getting Things Done: Mastering the Art of Stress-Free Productivity and Ready for Anything: 52 Productivity Principles for Work & Life. His work has been featured in Fortune, Fast Company, The Wall Street Journal and the Los Angeles Times.

How did David Allen become a recognized expert on personal productivity? What’s his recipe to stay on top of the universal principles in personal effectiveness? What are the principles that relate equally to a 10 year old in school, a soccer mom and a chief executive? This chapter explored how he gets his message across in a way that developed a highly visible brand.

Bridging the gap between left and right brain

David Allen's business, and ultimately his brand, is about personal productivity. He researches, develops and teaches best practice behaviors that allow a person to accomplish more with less effort. He offers solutions to help people master the mental game of productivity by showing us how to manage our mind instead of our time, how to focus our attention and how to create systems that work.

His particular style and brand is a unique combination of both results-orientation and quality of life. When people focus on time management and personal organization, it seems dry and left-brained. David adds a creative, exciting side to the productivity element. He wants people to say, "Gee, I am very productive *and* I have fun with my life." The ideas he presents are a fair balance between the polarities of the left brain (clarity, straightforwardness, directness and focus) and the right brain (elegance, grace, openness and creativity). He calls it "the yin and yang of personal productivity."

He was the "number-two guy"...

David's early professional experiences were entrepreneurial. He taught karate, managed a landscape company, ran a direct sales distributorship for vitamins, sold mopeds, and managed an automobile repair shop and service station in Los Angeles. He was also a chief cook and bottle washer in a restaurant, held many jobs as a waiter and helped start a travel agency. Most of these jobs were to pay the rent. He wasn't passionate about the work.

None of these jobs were in the world of big corporations. Usually, he worked in small start-ups because he knew the business owner. David was a great "number-two guy" for small businesses. He wasn't necessarily interested in the business itself, but he was good at seeing what needed to be done from the perspective of the processes.

By working closely with many different kinds of people in a variety of situations, David began to identify fundamental principles that apply to everyone, regardless of their situation. These principles became the core of what he teaches today. It wasn't a conscious process. It just evolved over time as a result of all of his different experiences.

When he managed a service station a block off the freeway in Los Angeles, he learned a lot about dealing with crises and putting out fires ... literally. From this experience, he learned to write down and then review all the projects that had to be done so he could make intelligent decisions during the day. This allowed him to free up his attention so he could follow his hunches when it got so crazy he didn't have time to think. This became a fundamental principle for him, something that psychologists call "distributed cognition" – keeping everything out of your head because it makes it easier to stay focused. By maintaining and reviewing the total workload regularly, you can deal with crises and ad hoc situations from a more mature, grounded perspective.

Keep everything out of your head – it makes it easier to stay focused when times get crazy.

For the last 25 years, David has been involved in education in some form. Two major interests came together for him during his career. The first one was his curiosity about high-performance behavior and personal growth. He became fascinated with thinkers who had something to say about universal truths and consciousness. He was very much into self-exploration, which led to discovering non-traditional education about human behavior. He became a trainer for Insight Seminars, a personal growth company that grew out of the human potential movement, and he used that information personally. It was transformational for him in terms of being able to clarify what he wanted to do with his life and what his unique skill sets were. He realized that he wanted to be an

educator, but not in the traditional form.

Second, he discovered a growing appetite for this information within the organizational and professional world. He noticed that many people were hungry for more effective and productive behaviors for themselves as well as their organizations. He explored productivity techniques that made a huge difference in terms of people's energy, focus and their ability to operate effectively. That intrigued him. He always liked to go into situations, assess opportunities for improvement, enhance the process, make things work better and then go on to the next challenge.

... And now he is his own brand

The many different professions he held, and his experience in running small companies as the number-two person, increased his confidence in himself and his abilities. It was a process of maturing, learning and exploring. In 1981, he decided to start his own consulting company, and began to work with small businesses ... mostly people he knew and had worked with before. From there his business grew one project at a time basis.

A key turning point came when the person responsible for organizational development at Lockheed came across David's material in the early 1980s, and he invited David to work with his Organizational Development team. By conducting organizational assessments, they uncovered a big need in their culture for personal productivity. People needed to take more responsibility and more risks, manage themselves better, avoid pointing fingers, take control of situations and move things forward out of their own initiative. As a team, they designed a pilot seminar in personal productivity for mid- and senior-level managers. They delivered the program to one thousand managers over the course of one year. It hit a nerve. It was very successful, and a pivotal event for David's consulting practice.

David's work has always been very market driven. He

evaluated information and what people needed, and then wove it into a format that was effective. Along the way, he gathered a tremendous amount of positive feedback from people who were able to walk out of his seminars, go back to their desk, and see a huge impact in terms of what they were doing. For instance, he had spent several years inside one of the most reputable global investment banks. It was an extremely challenging and demanding corporation. He taught productivity tools to investment bankers, the best and brightest people in the industry. Their expectations were huge. The cost of taking a day or half day out of their busy work schedule was high. He knew his program had better be good! Sure enough, they liked it, got value from it and rehired him. Delivering a sophisticated program to a client with high demands and expectations was both a tremendous learning experience and a breakthrough.

As David has developed his business, many of the people he has worked with end up leaving their positions to move on to bigger assignments. Once they got into a new workplace, they realized how much they relied on this new way of thinking. They made sure that David was brought into their new organization to work with their teams.

Getting results without stress

David Allen's message is very relevant and timely to people in the competitive environment on online business. We've all found ourselves saying, "I don't have enough hours in the day to do all things I need to do," or "I don't have enough time!" David's work addresses that common challenge in people's business and life. His work is about managing ourselves and all the stuff in our lives:

- How do we manage our energy ... our commitments ... our agreements?
- How do we inventory those? How do we track them? How do we stay focused?

- Where do we get our creative energy? How do we put that energy to use?

He has uncovered some of the best practices to deal with those issues, and that became the hallmark of his message. He packaged these insights into one- to three-day seminars. Participants learned great tools that had a tremendous impact on how they felt about getting things done, on their stress level and on their ability to get results with much less effort.

When people focus primarily on better results, there is a tendency to compromise in the quality of life. He discovered a powerful answer to that dilemma by practicing karate. As he worked toward his black belt, he adopted a core martial arts analogy, the idea that there is a lovely balance between focusing on results and being relaxed. In karate, the power of a hit comes from speed, not muscle power – a tense muscle

Our ability to generate results is directly proportional to our ability to relax

is a slow muscle. This means your ability to generate results is directly proportional to your ability to relax. You cannot get things done faster until you learn to slow down, take a step

back and get a different perspective on how you do things. Relaxation is the key to focus. You must be able to clear your head to focus your energy appropriately. This truly is an elegant model of productivity. Since David had not been a very physical, athletic person, he started to apply that principle of karate to create the largest amount of power or impact with the least amount of effort. Attaining his black belt was significant because it gave him this physical component, which added a lot of depth to his perspective and experience.

Responsibility is the root

From David's own life experience, there is one thing that people need to learn in order to increase productivity: Taking responsibility – being responsible for where they have put their

energy (their actions in the past) and being responsible for what they are doing with it now (their action now and in the future). We create our own experiences because we are the ones who allow *stuff* to enter our lives. We don't have to go to some universal, cosmic level of that truth to bring great value to people. Just look at the paper that people let stack up on their desk, and there is a great little model about what they've allowed themselves to create and how they have energy tied up. That energy is not available to other things until they know how to manage it, define it and get control of it.

For example, what does your e-mail inbox look like? An overloaded inbox simply represents what you have allowed to come into your world that needs to be managed. Many people have stuff in their inbox that they keep leaving there. They are not dealing with the input they have allowed to come into their life. There's nothing wrong with having more in your inbox than you have processed, as long as you're going to get to it at some point and that it maps your own agreement with yourself. The fact is that if the good fairy showed up and all of your e-mails disappeared, in two weeks you'd have the same number again. It's not about how much you have, it's about your comfort zone and how many unprocessed e-mails you feel comfortable with. You want to be able to close open loops and have clear agreements with yourself. This will allow you to be more relaxed when surprises come up. Rather than being stressed, you'll get creative.

We create our own experiences because we are the ones who allow stuff to enter our lives.

Improving effectiveness for knowledge workers

In the field of effectiveness and efficiency, Peter Drucker was one of the first to define the realm of "knowledge work." Peter often expressed that the toughest job of a knowledge worker is to define his or her "work." The work is not self-evident. They needed clarity.

To gain clarity we have to go to a higher place. David knows that clarity is never found at the same level as the confusion. He recommends that people loosen their conceptual grip, let go of the level they're focusing on, shift the horizon to another level and lift your sights. It's just like going on an airplane ride – the higher we go, the further we see. The ultimate task is to define the different levels of our own commitments. We need to gain clarity on every one of the following five levels to sharpen our focus:

- What is the project about? What is my role in this project? – This is the 10,000 foot level.
- What are my jobs and area of responsibility? – Now you've climbed to the 20,000-foot level.
- Where do I want to be a year from now? – This is the 30,000-foot level.
- What's my vision for the next ten years in my life? What do I want to have accomplished in that timeframe? – This represents the 40,000-foot level.
- What's my purpose? What am I really passionate about? – This is the 50,000-foot level.

Most people don't have a clear vision about where they're going and they haven't clarified what short-term things they need to accomplish to make their vision happen. They haven't defined their projects – all of the projects they have or need

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to set up in order to manage all of their areas of focus and responsibility. And most people haven't figured out the next action that will move these things forward. Too many people don't know why they're doing what they're doing. Just

think about the number of projects, tasks, assignments and to-do's people have going at any one time. How do we define

the 20 to 30 projects as real projects that we need to get done? What about the 100 to 200 action steps that go along with them?

The main point here is that you really have to focus on each of these levels. They aren't predefined for you. That's David's focus: defining the actions that will move you forward in the most efficient, effective way. You have to consciously consider these levels because if you don't, the pressures of life will decide for you. It's like waiting for the mugger in a dark alley before you start practicing your karate. It's too late. Plan your actions ahead of time, and you'll be in a much better position to be effective.

The key questions about the various levels of work have to be included in this productivity game. Defining your work is a much more subtle, sophisticated thing to do than simply applying A-B-C priority codes or making lists. There's a lot more to it than that.

Selling a personality is easier than selling a process

Over the years, and through many failures, David came to the conclusion that it was easier for him to sell a personality than a process or concept. When he was part of a partnership with two or three other consultants, they were selling a process not a personality. He didn't create any kind of individuality around the name "David Allen."

However, as business growth began to stagnate, financial pressures necessitated a new approach. David did some research and found that, at the time, the people who bought his services were a group of about 30 champions inside large corporations. Most of these relationships were ones that David had created and maintained through his personal engagement with them. "David Allen" was becoming the message and the medium. People were buying him and his style rather than a concept. Clients were interested in the David Allen training. He began to realize that he had more equity in his own name

than there was in the consulting group's name.

Initially, it was a big challenge to promote his own name because he didn't have the personal style of a self-promoter. He was not comfortable putting his name on the letterhead because he tended to be reserved. Again, it had to do with his ease in being the number-two person. It wasn't a natural process for him to throw himself out there and say, "Hey, look at me. This is really cool!" That skill is one he had to develop over time. He learned to be confident and willing to put the David Allen name on the map, and to create a positive mythology around his name and what it stands for.

He was willing to *sacrifice* his personality, promote it and build a brand through his reputation. It was a lot easier to wrap the brand around a personality than a process.

There was a rewarding consequence that came along with that shift: it gave him the freedom to take his own paintbrush and say, "Okay, here's the style that I'd like," rather than representing a group and compromising with equal partners. He developed his own style and design, a combination of creativity, ease and focus: "make it up – make it happen", the yin and yang of productivity.

His true purpose

At heart, David Allen is an educator. His mother was a schoolteacher, one of a long line of old-maid schoolteachers in his family. He always thought that at some point he was going to be an educator, but he had no idea that it would be along these lines. David's true passion is self-awareness and assisting other people in discovering that. He is driven to improve, expand and grow his abilities to experience life at deeper levels. It has been gratifying to offer education and create experiences for people that allow them to improve their lives in a productive, positive way with little effort.

The book was his breakthrough

Initially, it was a struggle to sell his material from a traditional standpoint. It never really worked to grow the business by hiring sales people to take his material, package it, position it, knock on doors and get people to buy it. What *was* successful was being out there, broadcasting the productivity principles and letting good clients experience the power and impact. He knew he had to leverage the clients' experiences and those relationships. The challenge was to establish the relationship to begin with.

There was no common denominator in terms of a client profile – except that his clients were smart, savvy and moving on a fast track. They wanted their life, both personally and professionally, to be better in the short-term. Those people were attracted to him and his seminars. He couldn't go find them – they had to find him. That was his big “ah-ha.” His business had to grow through referrals.

Initially, few people knew David Allen. He had no resources and little capital. The company still had debt. That forced him to focus on getting his message out as broadly as possible. He had to be creative in opening up the funnel and letting those people find him. Although he used different words for this, he focused on creating a brand. The strategy was the website and a book, but the critical *incident* was definitely publishing his first book. He knew intuitively it was the thing to do. He wanted to test his material in the fires of reality and then broadcast it through print. It took four years to get it done: one year to frame the concept, get an agent and a deal with a publisher, two years to write it (writing was not his day job) and another year for editing, publishing and marketing. *Getting Things Done* was

Writing a book adds credibility. When we are willing to put things in print, the world can shoot at it – it's a maturing process.

published in 2001. It became a best seller and his best calling card. He got great press. *Fast Company* wrote an initial one-page article and then a five-page article on him, pieces that made a huge difference in terms of publicity and reputation.

Once the book got recognition, his daily consulting rate quadrupled. Interestingly, as soon as he put anything in print, people would automatically think it was the truth. A book builds tremendous credibility. He laughs about it. “When we are willing to put it in print, the world can shoot at it – it’s a maturing process. It’s like getting a degree. What we learn at university is not as essential as demonstrating the rigor that we can hang in there and get through it.”

Key ingredients of the David Allen brand

David’s brand was built from the inside. It took more than 20 years and he is still refining it. He recommends taking a solid inventory of yourself in terms of what is unique about what you do. What do you love to do? Check with the people around you; ask your kids, friends and co-workers what is unique about you. Be willing to put yourself out there

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and give yourself a visual image. A picture is worth a thousand words. Furthermore, he suggests working with a creative strategist, somebody who has a good creative eye and can help you see things you can’t. Your image needs to reflect something that you truly want to be – the essence of your personality. Portraying

the style and image is like wearing a suit of clothes. It has to feel comfortable. David loves his image. He loves his business card and his website. It is his life expression. That is where some of the power comes from. People sense that congruence. In a way, his image serves as a bootstrap. On days when he feels down, he has to pick himself up and step into his own image.

There is value in creating a little bit of a myth around your name, as long as it is congruent. It has to be you.

David's basic rule of thumb for successful business practices: keep the same phone number and don't mess up. If you can just stick around and plant seeds with consistency and congruency, you can make it. It just takes time.

The real key for building his brand was putting together the pieces of the puzzle with the right people: a great book agent, a fabulous editor, an incredible technologist and web marketer, and a superb creative strategist. He also counts his wife, who has been a major support in building the back end of the business, as a member of his "dream team." The team offers a tremendous amount of love and support for him, and holds his best interests at heart. He wishes he could say, "And here's the formula for how you find the right people." Somehow, they found him – the right people at the right time. Trust your intuition and your heart. They will tell you where to start and what directions to move, and then you just have to trust that the pieces will fall into place.

Five Insights from David Allen on Increasing Personal Productivity

1. Take responsibility for where you put your attention and energy.
2. Our ability to generate results is directly proportional to our ability to relax. Slow down, take a step back and get a different perspective on how to do things.
3. Become comfortable in promoting yourself and your own name. People trust people more than processes.
4. Write and publish – it adds credibility and increases consulting fees, too.
5. Surround yourself with the right people to help you build your brand.

David Allen's Viewpoints

A change in focus equals a change in result

The greatest power we have to affect our world is always at our fingertips: our ability to change how we see things.

Energy follows thought

You are powerful all the time, by way of your attention and intention. The question is, "Toward what are you pointing that power?"

Getting to where you're going requires knowing where you are

A map is not functional until you know where you are on it. Objectively viewing your current reality always reduces confusion and misalignment.

The clearer your purpose, the more ways to fulfill it

There's a fascinating paradox of the material world: The more specific your vision or intention, the more expansive the creativity you will unleash. The more you know why you are doing what you are doing, the more freedom you have to explore all kinds of ways to get there.

Cleaning up creates clear direction

Creativity shows up when there's space. When mental space is cluttered with too many distractions, unmanaged agreements and loops, flow is limited. Closing open loops, whether they are major projects or boxes of old stuff, releases energy. For example, cleaning your garage can be one of the most effective ways to spark a dynamic vision.

If it's on your mind, it's probably not getting done

To get things done, the solution is simple: Write it down. Look at it. Think about it. Do it or say to yourself, "Not now."

Knowing your commitments creates better choices of new ones

Stress comes from unkept agreements with yourself. You can relieve that stress only by canceling the agreement, keeping the agreement or renegotiating it. But you can't renegotiate agreements that you forgot you made. They must be made conscious and kept to alleviate the pressure.

Perspective is the most valuable commodity on the planet

Putting things in a different context can generate unrealized ideas and solutions. Your point of view can change the most drastic circumstances into the most powerful positive experience. An infinite number of things in the universe are held back from you only by your altitude and attitude. Simply put, a change in focus equals a change in results.

The value of a future goal is the present change it fosters

A vision of a desired future allows you to focus immediately on an improved condition. Its value is not actually about achieving something in time, but rather about how it changes the substance and quality of the decisions you're making in this moment. It affects what you choose to perceive, feel and do in the present.

It's hard to stay on track without rails

We don't feel constrained by the limitations that really work for us. We're grateful for the lines down the middle of the road – they give us the freedom to get places fast with a minimum of

stress and risk. Effective forms don't take space – they create it. At times, tightening up our systems is what's needed to release new levels of output.

You can't win a game that you haven't defined

Games are fun only when you know the specific goal. The vision of “playing soccer” is realized only with a playing field and a goal at the end. And the activity of kicking the ball becomes meaningful when you know exactly where you want to kick it. The game of work requires the same edges and directions.

Too controlled is out of control

In golf and tennis, too firm a grip can cause you to “choke” a shot. Hanging on too tightly can limit your ability to deal with things from the most productive perspective. Fine points are fine, as long as there's a point.

You're the only one playing your game

You have created, accepted or promoted whatever you are experiencing. That's the great news, because you're in charge and you can change it if you want. Learning to respond effectively and efficiently to everything that has hooked your attention is a masterful behavior.¹

Simon Says:



Read *Ready for Anything: 52 Productivity Principles for Work and Life* by David Allen.

In 52 short chapters, David provides universal principles for mastering the balance between life and work. It's healthy food for the mind, mentally stimulating, thought provoking and immensely valuable in creating a stress-free, productive life.