

THREE RULES

to get you organized

By Steve McClatchy



I grew up in a family with twelve children. I have eight brothers and three sisters. Including my mother and father, there were fourteen of us. Add a couple of kids from the neighborhood, friends or cousins and there was always a degree of chaos in our house.

Trying to keep our house clean and organized was ambitious to say the least. Our dinner table was rarely encircled by fewer than sixteen or seventeen people. It took two people a couple of hours just to clean up afterward, and just when the job was finished, someone would come into the kitchen looking for a snack and mess it up again. We even had a combination lock on the food closet so that snacking could be kept under control. Our house was always in motion.

We owned two station wagons, four refrigerators, three vacuums, the kind of milk machine you would see in a school cafeteria, and a washer and dryer that were always on overload. If you consider that each of us had a pair of sneakers, a pair of dress shoes, a pair of winter boots and a pair of cleats, that was a minimum of forty-eight pairs of kids' shoes in the house.

If you're wondering how we managed it all, I have to admit I used to wonder myself. But I came to see that there were a few simple rules that my parents insisted upon to make things run more smoothly. For example: book bags belong in your room – not thrown by the front door as you run for the food closet; permission slips, or anything that needs to be signed, are to be tacked on the bulletin board when you come home from school so they can all be signed at one time; each floor of the house has a vacuum so there is no excuse for not cleaning something up.

The simple fact that there were fourteen of us made living by these three rules mandatory. The rules were a way of life, not something we really had to think about. Sheer survival dictated that things had to have their place, or we wouldn't be able to move around or ever find anything. Like tasks had to be grouped together so they could be completed all at once because there wasn't enough time to do it any other way. Having more than one of certain things just made sense because of the time saved and the convenience.

The Value of Simple Ideas Implemented

You didn't have to grow up in a large family to understand the value of these ideas. If they can streamline a potentially chaotic environment like my childhood home, they easily can be applied to any situation where there is limited space or time. Why did they help us in our home? We were fully committed to them! It wasn't an option to be half-way committed.

The problem today is not that we need new creative solutions. It's that we're not fully committed to the simple tried and true rules that would save us time. We all know what they are:

- deciding where things go when they're not in use and putting them there,
- grouping like tasks together and doing many of them at once, and
- having more than one of something you use all the time.

These are simple solutions that just make sense. If you fully commit to these rules, you will enjoy the full time-saving benefits they can produce.

Have you ever watched people trying to swim without getting their hair wet? It looks really silly doesn't it? Their arms flail back and forth quickly, and they may even be concentrating so hard that they're biting their tongue while they try to keep their hair out of the water. They are not fully committed to swimming, so they don't fully enjoy it. I'm asking you to get your hair wet with these rules. Don't half-step; dive in, so you can save the time you're looking for and get to the things you want to do.

Start With One Simple Decision: Where Does It Go?

Controlling clutter and getting organized is really about making one – just one – simple decision: Where is the dedicated location for each object when it's not in use? That's it. That's the whole secret. The problem: it's much easier said than done.

Have you ever been lured by an infomercial and then made a purchase because of the ad? If so, you probably understand the essence of this problem. When you watch an infomercial, you can get drawn in and wonder how you ever could have

made it to that point in your life without whatever they are selling. So you make the call, and the product is shipped. When it arrives in the box, you are excited! You open it up, you put the product to use right away, and you finish using it. Then what? Where are you going to put the product when it's not in use? Instead of making the one decision you have to make to declutter your life, you place the new product on the dining room table. When you were watching the ad on TV, did you think the dining room table would be a great place for storing the item when it wasn't in use? Probably not. You probably didn't think about this question at all.

When you haven't quite decided where an item should go when it's not in use, it becomes clutter. Whatever is on your dining room table right now that does not belong there is clutter. The same is true for that corner in your office and that pile on your desk. The hardest part of getting that pile of clutter off the desk is deciding where it's going to go. Once you decide, it is forever organized.

Making the decision is the hardest part. But once you have chosen a location for an object when it's not in use – a file folder, a closet, a drawer, a workbench, a safe deposit box – that object is organized. And don't forget that a legitimate place for an object may be on someone else's desk, in the hands of a charitable organization, in a recycle bin or a garage sale – or in the trash. After that, any item can be put away quickly without having to think about it. And when your house, office or car occasionally get messy, you easily can clean up by simply putting everything in its chosen location.

Grouping Like Tasks

In our house, permission slips all had to be placed on the bulletin board because grouping like tasks saved time. It's the same reason why it makes sense to keep a grocery list: because running to the grocery store every time you need one item would be a ridiculous waste of time. Grouping like tasks applies to buying birthday gifts, making phone calls, doing small jobs that require getting up from your desk or going to another floor of your building, or grouping questions for your boss or a client so you don't have to interrupt them twice or call them back.

Do yourself a favor. When creating your task list for the day, take one extra minute to group like tasks, and I promise you'll save more than the minute it took you to do it.

Having More Than One of Something

Having more than one of something you use all the time can save you time

and also put an end to procrastination. Having a duplicate key to each car in the household on everyone's keychain is just smart. Having a set of scissors, staplers, pens, tape, mini-screwdrivers and calculators in your kitchen, mudroom, and office is better than having them in just one location you have to go to – over and over – each time you need any of those things. Vacuums are heavy. Having one (or at least a DustBuster) on each level of your house would save you time and effort. The next time a friend, brother or sister asks you what you want for your birthday, request a DustBuster. We use ours every day.

If you travel a lot, then you probably have figured out why you should have two of everything you carry in your toiletries bag. Not having to continually pack and unpack those items when you get home is worth far more than the cost of duplicate items. Isn't the same true for your office accessories? Having a separate cell phone charger for your home and your travel bag, a duplicate iPod charger, laptop power cord and laptop batteries not only will save time packing and unpacking, but also will save time looking for things, reduce stress, and prevent you from forgetting to pack those items for your next trip. I often spend more money on accessories than I do on the actual devices I own because that kind of investment saves time and stress.

The Value of Time Saved

I don't try to save time just for the sake of saving time. I want the tasks *I have to do* to take as little time as possible so I can focus on doing the things I want to accomplish, the things I believe make life worth living. The less time I spend taking care of maintenance items, the more time I can spend investing in my relationships, working on my goals and having fun.

Controlling clutter, grouping like tasks, and having more than one of necessary and frequently used items are big time savers if you're fully committed to them. So I challenge you to dive in to the simple rules of organization and experience the benefits of less stress, less clutter, and more free time to enjoy your life.

Steve McClatchy is the president of Alleer Training & Consulting a provider of training, consulting and speaking services in the areas of Consultative Selling, Time Management and Leadership. If you would like to learn more about the ways Alleer can be a resource to your organization email Steve.McClatchy@Alleer.com, call 1-800-860-1171 or visit www.alleer.com.