

# Priority Management

Getting more of the *right* things done

Nina Sunday

#### Second edition revised 2020

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With a Bachelor of Arts and Diploma in Education, and after working in education, performing arts, sales and television, Nina Sunday CSP, is Queensland State President of Professional Speakers Australia and was past NSW State President and board member.

The CSP™ (Certified Speaking Professional) designation is conferred by Professional Speakers Australia and is the speaking profession's highest international measure of professional platform competence.

Nina Sunday founded Australian training company, Brainpower Training, and over two decades grew a network of Facilitators delivering business skills to private and government sectors. After decades living in Sydney, she now lives in hometown, Brisbane.

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## Chapter 1: Overchoice

Do you ever feel there are not enough hours in the day? There's too much to do in too little time?

Ever stay awake at night, your mind going over and over all the little things you need to remember to do? That's called mind churn.

Is your desk, paperwork, email, out of control? Ever forget something that later emerges as an emergency?

If this sounds familiar, then you're probably one of the millions of men and women whose lives are a juggling act.

High performers at work install systems to track all their to-dos. Having a system means your mind can relax knowing you are not relying on it to remember.

In a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous), it's more important than ever to achieve more in less time. More, better, faster - that's the sort of world we find ourselves working in.

The goal of this ebook is to help you work smarter and focus on what's really important. We are living in a world of infinite choices. We can suffer from overchoice. Let's gain workaday clarity and make smarter choices in a complex world.

Yes, the business day is overloaded. Your time and attention are assets. Manage them wisely.

A quick question - what's the most important number in business? Answer - one thousand, four hundred and forty. You have 1440 minutes in a day. Don't waste any of them.

In this ebook I offer you tools and tactics to accomplish more, perhaps even by doing less. We examine how to manage competing priorities, to focus on what's really important and to identify the next most important thing to do.

We'll clear the bottlenecks and lift the weight off your shoulders. You will feel more relaxed and in control over your work and your workload than most people.

## Chapter 2: Getting More of The Right Things Done

Your job is to get things done. Focus on achieving the top 20% of tasks which lead to 80% of your results. And here's a way to do it.

Steel magnate, Charles Schwab, President of Bethlehem Steel from 1903, was the first American to earn over a million dollars a year. As the story goes, in 1918, when Schwab met efficiency expert, Ivy Lee, he challenged Lee with, 'What can you teach me about productivity, Ivy, that I don't already know?'(1)

Accepting the dare, Lee handed Schwab a blank piece of paper and instructed him to write down his top six priorities for tomorrow. After Schwab listed his six items, Lee next instructed, 'Now number each item in order of priority.' Schwab numbered his list.

Lee explained, 'When you arrive at your desk, start working on your number one item. Stay with it until it's complete or you've taken it as far as you can go. Only then start on your number two item, until it's complete or you've taken it as far as you can go; then your number three item, and so on.

'Cross off each task as it is accomplished, then move to the next to-do on your list.

'As each new action turns up throughout the day, add it to your list according to its priority, while staying focused on your current task, unless that new item is of higher importance than the one you are currently working on.

'At end of every business day, create a fresh list of your top six to-dos, in order of priority, ready for next day, including anything unfinished or new things you've added during the course of the day.'

Lee continued, 'Teach your managers to do a Top Six list at end of every day, ready for next day. And oh, by the way Charles, don't pay me now for this idea. When you are convinced of the value of this system, send me a cheque for whatever you think this idea is worth'.

Five weeks later Schwab invited Lee to his office. 'You remember, Ivy, that efficiency tip you gave me? That's the single most useful piece of advice I've ever had in business. Here's my thank you.' Schwab handed Lee a cheque for \$25,000.

This simple Top Six idea helped Schwab grow Bethlehem Steel into the second largest steel producer in the United States.

#### Five Quick Questions:

- 1. Do you use a to-do list?
- 2. Do you prioritise your Top Six items?
- 3. Do you create a fresh Top Six list at end of each day?
- 4. Do you start each day working on your top priority?
- 5. Do you complete each priority one at a time?

Try these five steps for a week and be amazed at how many more things you can get done in a day; more of the right things.

#### Action

- 1. Each day for one week, make a note of your starting time for the number one item on your to-do list; your top priority.
- 2. With each new task, add it as a new item on your to-do list, but keep working on your top priority.

- 3. Stay with your number one priority until it is complete, or you have taken it as far as you can.
- 4. Only shift your focus from your current priority task if the new item is more important than the one you are working on.
- 5. Note the time you complete your top priority item.
- 6. Repeat this process for your number two item, then number three item, and so on.

Can you see that you accomplish more by focusing on one task at a time?

A final note: don't multi-task. Consider the Zen proverb: *The hunter who chases two rabbits, catches neither one.* 

## Chapter 3: How to Stop Mind Churn Affecting Your Sleep

Do you ever stay awake at night, your mind going over and over all the little things you have to do? This is called 'mind churn', and there's a ridiculously simple way to cure it.

I was working as conference organiser for an international trade conference, (the second event I was in charge of for this client) and feeling quite overwhelmed; 400 delegates were flying in from around the world. With the event date looming, I felt as if it was a race against time.

My colleague, Muriel, who was more experienced at organising big events, requested I show her my to-do list. I printed it off, she scanned it, then asked, 'Nina, is that absolutely everything?' 'Well no, Muriel, on this list are the most important things; the rest are up here', pointing to my brain, indicating I was relying on memory.

Her response? 'Nina, I only work with people who write down absolutely every to-do.' I thought about it for a moment then responded with, 'I'm busy getting things done. Isn't it a waste of time compiling such a list?' I argued, 'I know what has to be done. I'm doing it. Shouldn't I be trusted?'

Muriel used the broken record response and repeated, 'Nina, I only work with people who write down absolutely everything.' I became more adamant, 'Muriel, you can trust me. I did the last conference. It will be fine!'

Muriel firmly stood her ground. 'Nina, I only work with people who write down absolutely everything.' We had reached an impasse. If I wanted Muriel to stay working on the project, I had to relent.

I agreed to privately do a pen and paper exercise, what's called a brain dump. I wrote down every to-do on one sheet of paper. Surprisingly, it took only 15 minutes. When done, something interesting happened. I looked at my list and every task was there, in black and white, on one page. Something clicked. By seeing a full list, I felt more in control. It all seemed more do-able than before.

Previously, my perception had been that I was under pressure with an endless number of things to do, in a race against the clock. I now felt all was in the palm of my hand.

By getting the monkey off my back, by getting everything out of my head and onto paper, suddenly I felt more relaxed, more in control, more calm about everything yet to do.

And I have Muriel to thank for that. Because if she hadn't insisted, I never would have discovered the importance of writing down absolutely everything.

#### Action

- 1. Write every task down, not just the critical things.
- 2. Don't rely on memory to remember to-dos; it takes up headspace better used for planning, improving, setting goals, establishing priorities and thinking strategically and creatively.
- 3. Have a system to capture all your to-dos. It enables your mind to relax, so you feel more in control and sleep like a baby.

## Chapter 4: Why Too Much Sitting Is Bad for Your Health

Some years ago, Yahoo! gave all staff fitness bands to wear to monitor physical activity at work - sitting, moving. It stored that information onto their smartphone using an app.

Why? To encourage less sitting, more movement; because too much sitting is bad for your health.

'For people who sit most of the day, their risk of heart attack is about the same as smoking', says Cardiologist, Martha Grogan, from the Mayo Clinic. [1] Prolonged sitting is the new smoking!

The emerging field of Inactivity Studies measures how much people move - or don't move - and the outcomes. Consider this - when you're awake and not moving, are you sitting? Around the world, most people spend up to 60% of their day sitting. An American Cancer Society study of 120,000 adults published in 2010 suggests the more people sit, the shorter their average life span. [2]

Now to boost staff productivity there's a trend from conventional workplace environments to more innovative, movement-oriented ones.

#### Frequent Short Breaks

At work, frequent short breaks - five minutes every hour or so - are not a waste of time but essential for good time management and productivity. By working a few minutes less per hour, you'll work smarter, get more things done; and now the data indicates - live a longer life.

#### What can you do?

1. Do you eat your lunch at your desk? Take an active lunch break, one that includes a walk, see some (blue) sky. You'll arrive back at work refreshed and ready to tackle not just the urgent, but important tasks.

#### 2. Put up some signs:

- 'This is a stand friendly workplace.'
- 'We support standing meetings.'
- 'Stand up. Sit less. Move more'
- 'Stand up for your health.'

Encourage discussion on how to become a more movement-friendly workplace. Here's more . . .

#### Stand up.

- avoid prolonged sitting beyond 30 minutes
- set a timer
- stand up when the phone rings or someone walks up to your desk
- Sit less have standing meetings
- Move more use stairs instead of an elevator
- Become more aware of whether you are standing or sitting.
- Reduce prolonged sitting beyond 30 minutes at a time by increasing standing to up to 90-minutes per person, per day.
  - Buy a stand-up or height-adjustable desk (and yes, there are now treadmill desks!)

Get up every 25 minutes to do 2 minutes of whatever kind of exercise you like.

## Chapter 4: The Best Practice of To-do Lists

How do you write your items on your action list? Exactly which words do you use?

#### **Activity**

As an exercise, look the top six items on your to-do list. What is the first word written describing each action?

Is the first word a doing word, a verb? Because if a task dot-point starts with a naming word, a noun, then often it's describing not an action step but a project - a cluster of multiple steps. With a project, the very next item may not be concrete or tangible. It's harder for your mind to visualise exactly what is the very next action.

And that's where procrastination starts. If you're in a hurry, and you're looking for the next item to do, but on your list you read, 'Report for board', your brain may not stop to analyse by asking, 'What is the very next step to move this project forward?'

It suddenly becomes too hard and your attention moves on to the next item on your action list.

If you make the first word descriptor a doing word, a verb, you may find it shifts things for you. Participants at my live Time Management programs have shared such feedback with me.

#### What - Project Vs. Action Step

Second guestion - what is the difference between a project and an action step?

A project consists of multiple action steps. If an item on your action list is actually a cluster of tasks, then it's a project. If you've written the name of a project instead of the very next action step, that's another reason your brain may procrastinate.

When your brain is uncertain about what is exactly the next thing to do, it will pass over onto another item on your action list, one where you know precisely what you are to do next.

For example, something as simple as 'meeting minutes' is a cluster of tasks. Not only do you have to compile the minutes document, but you may have to list who to send to, check if you have all email addresses, and if not, obtain them. Then prepare the email to send.

Your brain reads 'meeting minutes' and knows instinctively it's not a 2-minute job, and may move on to the next concrete action step.

#### When

What task is at the top of your list to start the day? On your list of high priority items,

Do you start the day with your number one priority? What task is at the top of your list to start the day?

Something to be aware of, if your number one priority is easy, but another item on your list for the day is difficult to get done, it might make sense, while you're fresh, to do the difficult thing first, or perhaps one you *least* want to do first, and get it out of the way!

#### Must Vs. Like

There's a difference between what you *must* Vs. *like* to do. Don't write your list in order of what you like to do. List items in order of priority instead, so you get your biggest 'must' for the day out of the way early, as item number one or two.

#### Urgent Vs. Important

Are you working on urgent and important tasks more than 75% of your day? Be careful - working in the urgent zone more than 75% of time, day in and day out, leads to burnout.

Making time to work on important things *ahead of their deadline* provides a sense of completion so you feel relaxed and in control, and on top of things.

#### Where

Where should you record your to-do list? You can put your list on a device, a document, an app, in a notebook, in your calendar. I'm not too prescriptive about where you record your action items, But I will suggest that calendars should be only for time-based appointments rather than all your to-dos.

What I do - I have a shortcut on my desktop leading to a Word document listing all my action items. When I open, I look at the very first task at the top (everything else is below that). At the end of every day, creating a fresh list for the next day, I re-order, checking down into my list of 'other' things. I can escalate anything that needs to be achieved tomorrow.

#### Why

When it comes to identifying competing priorities, it helps to understand why a task important.

Let me tell you a story from when I was facilitating Time Management with a sales team. A pharmaceutical company flew in their Salespeople from around the country for a national sales conference.

One of their products was liquid soap. With the initial order a new client received complimentary dispensers for their restrooms. One of the salespeople told us he was handy with a screwdriver and enjoyed installing dispensers, as a favour. But In fact, the client maintenance team should install.

I asked, 'Your salary is high-value. Your job is to find new customers. If you're investing time in performing an unnecessary task the client's team could and should do, then who's losing?

He ultimately agreed that activity, which ate up time and focus, wasn't the best use of his time in business hours.

#### Who | What if

From time to time ask yourself, 'Do I have to do this? Can someone else do this?' That's especially important if you are a manager. And because a leader's job is to strategise, plan and innovate, team leaders should frequently ask themselves, 'Who can I delegate to?' That's where the 'what if' comes in.

Indeed, innovation is everybody's responsibility at work; constantly asking, 'Is there a better way to do this?'

#### Kaizen

Kaizen is a Japanese philosophy of continuous improvement. Find ways to improve the way things are done, and don't just perform things how they've always been done. Change before you have to.

## Chapter 5: The Power of Focus

Do you ever find yourself doing three things at once? Eating lunch while writing an email while talking on the phone?

There's magic in completing things one at a time. It's all about focus.

One secret of people who are well-organised is to focus on completing things one at a time rather than trying to do several things at once. They set an easy pace and go steadily.

Focusing on one task at a time builds concentration. Such concentration opens you to experience flashes of insight. With focused attention you have a greater chance of making a mental leap forward or penetrating the complexity of a task.

Have you ever noticed the momentum that builds with a project or task? You can achieve more by working on one job for four solid hours, compared to spending 30 minutes sporadically off and on, over 2 weeks.

Trying to juggle several things at once dilutes effort and leads to errors. Avoid grasshopper behavior - jumping from task to task. Focus and complete one priority at a time.

#### **Action summary**

When you are in telephone mode, make a lot of phone calls.

When you are in email mode, do them all at once, rather than one at a time as they show up.

It takes mental energy to shift into a new rhythm or work with a different office tool, so plan to perform all of one type of task, one at a time.

You will achieve more in less time.

## Chapter 6: Marginal Gains Approach To Continuously Improve

Constant reinvention is the key to staying relevant in a world of accelerating acceleration.

Are you familiar with the annual Tour de France cycle race where the peloton, (the main group of cyclists), snakes through the French countryside and villages?

Until 2012, no British cyclist had ever won the race. This lack lustre history changed with Sir Bradley Wiggins' victory in 2012, followed by British Chris Froome winning four Tours de France, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017. The winning streak continued with British team member, Geraint Thomas, winning 2018, followed by Brit, Egan Bernal, winning 2019.

This means the British team won seven of eight Tours in close succession. What explains this amazing run of British wins? It's not luck.

The secret? It started with their coach, Dave Brailsford, applying the business principle of Marginal Gains to the sport of cycling. It's a philosophy of process improvement; improving every little thing by 1%. Accumulation of small 1% gains leads to a tipping point that adds up to an incredible quantum leap.

The British Team looked at every little detail around cycling and training and recovery and asked, 'How can we do this a better way?' They looked for 1% gains everywhere and optimised every little thing.

#### For example:

- equipment: Bike seat ergonomics were studied; they optimised shape of the seat. Tyre weight was improved.
- nutrition: They asked, 'What do riders consume while riding? How can we improve that?'
- weekly training: 'Can the program be revised?'
- sleep: By asking, 'What pillow induces best sleep?' they identified the best pillow to take with them to hotels.
- massage is part of post-training recovery. By asking, 'Which massage gel is more effective?'
  they found a 1% improvement there.
- health: It's essential to enjoy good health and hygiene. By researching how to best wash their hands they were able to prevent infection.

Continuous 1% improvements over three years led to the team winning its first Tour De France in 2012. Winning six of the next seven Tours de France is not just a lucky streak. It's the result of a culture of finding and implementing small daily improvements.

What can we learn from the success of the Marginal Gains concept? Small daily improvements are key to long-term significant results.

#### Action

1. Ask your customers, 'If we could improve our service even by 1%, what would you like us to do?'

- 2. Don't live with bottlenecks, delays or double-handling. Trial new ways of doing things.
- 4. **Question everything you do.** Constantly reinvent the way you do things by asking daily, 'How else can we do this?'
- 5. Ask who, what, where, when, how and why . . .
- Why that way?
- Why then?
- Why there?
- Why that person?
- How else could this be achieved?
- Who else could do it?
- **5.** Remember the Pareto Principle or 80/20 rule. 1 Fix the top 20% of problems; overall you'll receive an 80% improvement.

In 1897, Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian political economist, published<sup>(1)</sup> his observation that 80% of land was owned by 20% of the population. This is now called the 80/20 Rule or Pareto Principle and this 80/20 pattern has since been applied to most aspects of modern life.

For example, in business 80% of turnover comes from 20% of clients. 20% of efforts produces 80% of results. This means, if you have ten things to do, two of them will be more important and yield more payoff than the other eight combined. 20% of your workload are high payoff, high priority items.

A good tactic is to identify the top 20% of important tasks from your list of possible to-dos and devote 80% of your time completing these.

6. Lead a Marginal Gains brainstorming session with your team. Empower people to contribute by offering suggestions, thereby 'owning' process improvement. Analyse workflow, identify bottlenecks, eliminate double-handling and duplicating of tasks. This reduces costs and improves efficiency.

It's not about making one big change that has earth-shattering results. It's about all the small choices we make every day that add up over time.

Waiting to implement big changes might mean the 'same old, same old' continues to happen. But if we get into the habit of constantly improving processes, one little bit at a time, it adds up.

Shouldn't we all be looking for marginal gains, lots of little 1% improvements, every day that add up over time?

## Chapter 7: Kaizen - How To Create A Workplace With Energy and Vitality

In the Japanese language 'Kaizen' means 'continuous improvement' — from 'kai' meaning change or to make better and 'Zen' meaning 'good'.

The philosophy of Kaizen comes out of the Toyota Way, a Quality manufacturing approach that grew Toyota into one of the largest vehicle manufacturers in the world.

The goal of Kaizen is to create a workplace with energy and vitality which respects people, provides them with the will to strive, and by doing so, enhances feelings of self-worth.

#### What Is The Real Work People Should Be Doing In The Workplace?

According to the Kaizen approach, people are at work not just to supply their labour, but also to use their creativity to improve the way things are done.

Continuous small improvements (Kaizen) add up to major benefits: faster delivery, lower costs and greater customer satisfaction.

Tasks are made simpler and easier, speed and efficiency is increased, processes are re-engineered, a safe work environment is maintained and product quality is constantly improved.

The overarching purpose of Kaizen is to create a vibrant workplace with each individual making a contribution.

#### How to Apply Kaizen In The Workplace

#### **Identify Problems To Solve**

Ask everyone to look around their own work area to discover small problems. At the same time, consider one possible way to resolve this problem.

Kaizen is not just about finding a problem; it's being creative to come up with a possible solution.

Submit that problem - with possible solution - to the Kaizen Committee. They will meet to consider the problem and suggested solutions and come up with another perhaps more elegant, solution. That committee has authority to take action.

#### 2. Kaizen Board

Under kaizen, all staff are empowered to locate gaps, inefficiencies, and offer suggestions for improvement.

Better than an anonymous suggestion box that people mostly ignore or an invisible online document on your intranet is to place a physical kaizen board in a central area to allow people to add ideas.

If you search on the web for the search term, 'Kaizen board', you'll see plenty of examples; but essentially, it's a notice board with four headings:

Ideas	To Do	Doing	Done
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Make the board colourful. People are attracted to add fresh ideas to the board and can stay up to date with what the Kaizen committee is doing. Make it easy for people to make suggestions; then get back to them with a response. Include a 'hall of fame' area to display quick wins as they occur, with 'before' and 'after' photos. Recognise the individual who came up with the idea by adding their photo.

Alternatively have an Ideas Board with four segments:

Low Effort /	High Effort /	Low Effort /	High Effort /
High Benefit	High Benefit	Low Benefit	Low Benefit

#### 3. Kaizen Committee

A Kaizen Committee can be made up of five to ten team members drawn from different levels of the organisation who are each passionate about change and improvement.

The committee meets weekly for no more than an hour to discuss ideas for improvement from staff and take action to improve the situation.

You can call this group any name you like e.g. 'Process Improvement Group', 'Reinvention Team'.

#### 4. Kaizen Report

A Kaizen report is short and simple. It summarises before and after. Before: we had this problem. We took this action. Effect: it became a little better.

#### 6. Be A Problem-Solver

Toyota once used on their car-making assembly line the Andon cord, an emergency cable made of thin nylon rope hanging on hooks. The first pull summoned team leaders to see if they could fix the problem without stopping the line. An upbeat tune played at the same time. If it couldn't be fixed on the spot, a second pull on the Andon cord stopped the assembly-line to allow time to correct the problem. A final pull on the cord started the line again. The Andon cord became a symbol of Toyota's focus on quality and was copied by other auto manufacturers. You can read more about the Andon cord in the next chapter. (In 2014 the cord which hung like Christmas tinsel was replaced by yellow push buttons.)

Like the Andon cord on Toyota's assembly line, build a culture of stopping to fix problems instead of continuing to ignore bottlenecks or inefficiencies. Empower people to locate a problem worth fixing.

Everyone can become a problem-solver. The challenge of looking for ways to improve makes work interesting, at the same time benefits the organisation.

#### Kaizen Their Job

Ask people to kaizen their job by continuously asking themselves, 'How can we do this differently?'

## References

The quotes, anecdotes and ideas described in this ebook were accumulated from a variety of sources over a number of years. While we've made every attempt to fully attribute the origin of each of these items, the author may have been unable to list some sources in the detail preferred.

#### Chapter 4: Why Too Much Sitting Is Bad For Your Health

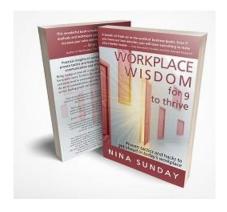
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## Nina Sunday's book at Amazon:

ISBN-13: 978-0-9942353-2-9



Workplace Wisdom for 9 to thrive: Proven tactics and hacks to get ahead in today's workplace

'Wow, this book is a breath of fresh air in the world of business books. It's packed full of ideas without the filler and fluff. Even if you have just two minutes you will learn something and it will make you a better leader. Own it and keep it on your desk. You'll be glad you

Dale Beaumont, CEO, Business Blueprint