

Three-Dimensional Self Management

 – by David Allen

For many years I have been teaching about the horizontal and vertical aspects of productivity. “Horizontal” represents the ability to quiet distractions and maintain a complete and total inventory of things to do across the whole spectrum of our day-to-day engagements. For instance, when you have a phone and time, you have available every call you need and want to make and your head is clear enough to make them. Basically, you’re feeling OK about what you’re not doing, because your available list of options is complete. “Vertical” represents the ability to view what you’re doing from the appropriate horizon and to shift your focus as required. You analyze your strategic plan in one moment, answer emails in the next, reconnect with your core values when you need to, review all your projects weekly, tweak your lifestyle visions with your partner creatively and proactively. You’re facile in your ability to frame which kind of thinking you need to be doing, about what, and when.

It’s about both control and perspective. And if self management can be interpreted as how well our actions match our priorities, or simply how good our choices are about what we’re doing, then we must have equal capability in each of these dimensions to be at our best.

Can you have one without the other—control without perspective, or vision without control? Ultimately, no. If you’re out of control, it’s almost impossible to maintain appropriate perspective. And if you can’t see things from the right altitude, you’ll lose control at some point. But relatively speaking, yes—there can be an imbalance.

On a matrix of control vs. perspective, there are four quadrants: low control and low perspective, high control and low perspective, low control and high perspective, high perspective and high control. Each of these is at least a little familiar to all of us as a state we may find ourselves in.

1. Low control, low perspective = the Victim. Driven by latest and loudest, simply reacting to relieve the most obvious and immediate pressures and pains.
2. High control, low perspective = the Micro Manager. Obsessed with containing and ordering detail, neglecting the Why question and the bigger-picture realities. Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is the extreme.
3. Low control, high perspective = the Crazy Maker. Fabulous ideas, by the minute, unrealistically overcommitting focus and resources. Attention deficit disorder (ADD) is the extreme.
4. High control, high perspective = Master and Commander. Keeping the eye on the prize with attention to critical detail, holding steady with a firm but flexible hand.

Which one describes you, today, right now? Are you reading this essay to avoid getting more control or perspective, or because you have them?

I'm in and out of each one of these configurations, several times a day. I may start out having gotten it all together, sailing ahead as the captain of my ship. I then get a crazy idea, make one phone call, and turn my world upside down. I get overcome by the new problems or possibilities and I'm crashing on rocky shoals. In my excitement or nervousness I then decide to prune another tiny branch off a maple tree outside my office (can I get control of something, please!?) No matter. The key is not forever staying at optimum perspective and control—it's having a good GPS system and knowing how to right the vessel and get back on course when it wavers and when I get around to getting it together again.

This was the inspiration for my latest version of our public seminar, and why it's called "Making It All Work"—to chart the currents of the waters of control and perspective (and the lack thereof), so we can more easily identify where we are and what kind of activity and focus will have the most value for us, at any moment. Most people's initial positive experience with the Getting Things Done® method is centered around the getting-control aspect—making sense and getting a handle on all the "stuff" coming at us and clogging up our brains and our lives. Rightly so, because you must pay attention to the level that most has your attention, first. But once we have things relatively stable, there must be an equal focus on the right focus. We need to know and trust why we are subscribing to that magazine in the in-basket, not just that we can park it in Read/Review. Is it something that's getting us to where we're going, mapping to what's really important to us now, or just momentum from an old inspiration that needs updating, and should be cancelled? Getting Things Done (GTD®) is about making sense of and managing multiple priorities, with the best models for rapidly gaining control and perspective—critical for self management.

But hey, what's the third dimension?

Ah, it's acknowledging and consciously engaging with that which constantly pulls us, guides us, and impels us toward creativity and coherence. It's the recognition and participation with something that promotes perspective and control, almost magically, and yet transcends them. It's the thing that, in the worst and best of circumstances and when it often makes no sense, gives us the experience of acceptance, surrender, intuition, courage, and forgiveness. It's our heart.

The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. —Vaclav Havel

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