

WORK IN PROGRESS: THE “TO DO LIST”

There are many complaints and problems that we hear when it comes to management and delivery of work. It goes from being unable to cope with the high volume of work to losing track of the things to do and most of all, the one we hear most frequently – the inability to deliver on time i.e. missing a deadline.

It is not a secret that these problems are mainly due to our own doing, more specifically, in the way we plan and execute our work. Most of the time, we are too caught up in the work that we never really have the chance to spend time looking at how to improve the way we work. We ignore the fact that any delay in our work delivery would have a huge impact on other people and the bigger picture of things.

The question is and has always been this – where did we go wrong?

There is no standard answer to this simple yet difficult question. Most of us would give various excuses to justify our failure. On many occasions, we resort to blaming others, while deep down inside we know this is not actually the case. There is something much closer to us that have contributed to the problem.

An attempt to answer this mind boggling question would only be successful if first, we are honest to ourselves and admit that there are flaws in how we do things, and second, we dedicate time to understand the way we work

and further dissect the existing process into smaller steps.

If we really go through the trouble of doing this exercise and analyse each step, it would not be difficult for us to notice and identify a common mistake that most of us usually make. The problem actually starts at the very beginning of the process; at the stage where we **plan our work**.

Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.

Abraham Lincoln

Is this entirely true? In most cases, if we were to be entirely honest with ourselves, we know that the answer to this question is a “yes”. How many of us actually take time to plan out the steps we need to take to complete our work? How many of us actually implement something as basic as a “to do list”? Let’s say if we have one, how many of us actually consistently use, track and update our work progress according to the list?

As much as these questions sound basic and to certain extent intimidating, these are the realities that we need to face and address in order for us to take that first step to tackle our work inefficiency issues. Looking at it from a broader and more general perspective, even in life itself, the reason why we end up in certain situations or conditions (be it good or bad) is usually a result of the decisions and actions we had taken at the beginning. Hence, addressing things at the very start is critical in our journey to improve ourselves.

Yes, the solution does not sound exciting; it is merely going back to basics. But then again, most of the problems in this world can actually be solved by doing just that – going back to basics. It is something that we already know or at least, many of us believe we already know. If that is really the case, then why do many of us still face issues in coping with work delivery?

My Little Notebook: Discovering the “To Do List”

Since I started work back in 2003, I’ve always had the habit of having a “to do list”.

By nature, I am not someone whom you could say structured. Structuring my life was something I learned and acquired through my higher education studies. I graduated with a degree in Information Technology (IT) that was based on a Computer Science syllabus. Hence, its modules were pretty much structured in nature. It was always about “If” and “then”, steps by steps and logical thinking.

I did not imagine how much this would help me in managing my work life (actually, even my personal life). Since graduation, I have never actually worked in the IT field despite numerous interview attempts. Fate brought me to something unexpected – I ended up in the insurance industry doing something totally unrelated to what I studied. At that point of time, I had thought that all the knowledge I acquired during my degree years was no longer relevant. I was proven wrong as the knowledge came in handy more than I expected.

I used to have a small notebook and a pen in my shirt pocket at all times. I would list down the tasks I have for the day, both work and personal in the notebook. Yes, I even wrote down things like buying sweets or even a pack of tissue just so that I don’t forget. If I had forgotten to bring the book or ran out of pages, I would write the list down on a small piece of paper, small enough so that I could still keep it inside my pocket.

Always having the list close to me was something very important to me. That is the reason why I always made sure that the paper is small enough for me to carry it around.

I used to get really restless whenever I misplace the book or lose the sheet of paper. Each time this happens, I would rush to write down the list again and

quickly keep it back inside my pocket. Incidents like this could be a bit stressful especially during busy days where I have a long list of important things to do. During chaos and rush hour, not knowing the things to do or which one goes first is torture. The list actually helped to keep my sanity intact during such crazy days, losing it was obviously the last thing I wanted to happen.

Rewriting the list to me was a process that is worrisome, troublesome and to a certain extent, burdensome. Being normal human beings, we are forgetful creatures. The thought of me forgetting something important to be included in the list was terrifying. What more if the item I had forgotten is the most critical one; that would mean serious trouble.

One may argue that if something is so important, how could we forget it? But then again, during panic times coupled with a long list of things to do, the likelihood of this happening is always there. How can we guarantee that we don't forget things in life?

Humans always forget – this is an undeniable fact.

From time to time, I would take out the list and look at the things I have to do. I actually did this quite frequently, looking at it at least once every hour. I would then focus on the ones that needed to be completed immediately.

Planning then became something that I naturally developed; segregating and prioritising the items on the list so that I could complete it on time or better still, ahead of time. In the earlier days, I had yet to learn a more structured way of organising my list. I acquired the technique a bit later in my work life, which I will be sharing more on this later.

The best thing about the “to do list” is the moment I get to strike an item out from the list using my pen, literally. The feeling is spectacular; it is like a huge burden being lifted off my shoulders. I would feel this every single time I get to do it as I now had one less thing to worry.

Over time, I started to develop a habit of trying my best to strike out as much as possible from the list. Clearing the list wasn’t enough; I wanted to do it as quickly as possible. I did not realise how this habit had helped me (actually more of forcing me) to work faster. At least it got me working really hard so that I’ll be able to strike out the items on my “to do list”.

At the end of each day, I would tear the page with the current day’s list from the book. I would then start a new list for the next day. If there were any outstanding items, I would then rewrite it on to the new list. It was like starting a clean new sheet every day. This was psychologically very important to me; the previous list was already in a mess with strike-outs and scribbles here and there. I did not want to start the new day with a messy view of the things ahead of me.

Come to think of it, this concept of starting clean and fresh every day actually helps in managing my self-motivation. It is only natural that people prefer to work in clear, organised and clean condition. Given a choice, no one wants to work in messy and chaotic conditions.

To illustrate this, let us take an example of our work desk. I personally make it a point to keep my desk clean and organized, at least to my standards. It allows me to work more comfortably, which directly or indirectly helps in managing my work better.

However, in reality, many of us live the opposite of this so-called “ideal” environment. Most of our working desks are a complete mess, full of documents and papers covering every inch that can be seen by the naked eye.

I would usually ask the standard question; “what are all these papers on your desk?” and people always get stuck in answering this question. In most cases, we are unsure what the papers actually are but still decide to convince ourselves that most of it are related to work. There is always that risk of putting away something important if we start to throw things out without properly

going through it. I am pretty sure if we had our way, we would organise our desks better and not let it be in such a mess. A cleaner sight would always be preferred, anytime.

A clean view of the things to do for the day is important, both in terms of content and presentation. It helps with the execution of our daily work, both physically and psychologically.

This was my simple method of planning my work. It was something I used to practise for many years. It is not that I don't do it anymore; I still do it in a different way these days but that is a separate story altogether.

So, what's the big deal with planning our work? What is so great about having a "to do list"?

Planning Lightly: Wrong Mindset

Despite claiming that the method I used to practise is simple, the fact remains that it has many components and perspectives. This proves that it is not simply a list of items to do. It proves some simple facts; planning cannot be taken lightly and is core to execution. The way or methods used to plan and track the list is critical to achieving success. We will talk more on this in the sections to come.

For now, there is one important point I need to highlight. A common mistake that many of us make is our tendency to simplify the definition and actual act of planning. This is where the problem usually begins; starting the journey with the wrong mindset.

Most of the time, the planning process is taken lightly and is not given the appropriate attention it deserves despite us religiously claiming it to be important. It is approached without having the right discipline and commitment, and it more often than not turns out to be just another exercise. The results are

obvious and not surprising; we continue to face execution issues and failures as a result of poor planning.

It is an open secret that we humans lack the discipline to perform the important steps in most things in life. Whenever there is a chance or opening for a shortcut, we tend to go with the easier option rather than going through the hardship of doing the right thing. This usually happens when we consider doing the right thing as less important; our main priority is getting there.

However, adopting this mindset will usually give the opposite result. On the surface, it might seem that we had achieved certain short term objectives but in the longer run, we are getting nowhere.

If we continue to make this mistake, everything just becomes mere words that we utter and not something that we actually do. Even if we claim to do it, we will fail miserably at doing it consistently, which disqualifies and drifts it further away from the definition of success.

This leaves us with no other choice; to take planning seriously.

It is the first important step that we need to take if we are really serious about improving the quality and delivery of our work.

The Importance of Planning – Justified

To further justify the importance of planning, let us take a look at some examples from the life of the greatest man ever lived, Prophet Muhammad (صَلَّى اللّٰهُ عَلٰيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). If we were to study the life of Prophet Muhammad (صَلَّى اللّٰهُ عَلٰيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), we will be able to learn the discipline that he practises in planning his life. We will see how meticulous he was in planning and prioritising every aspect of his day. He managed to achieve and do so much each day by practising this formula, which is a legacy he has left for us to learn from.

If we were to read on the *seerah* (life) of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) with specific focus on his daily and regular routines, we will notice that Prophet (ﷺ) had specifically allocated his time to attend to the different important matters in life, striking a balance on both worldly and hereafter matters. His life routine had been narrated to us by his loyal companions and his devoted family through various authentic hadiths.

In summary, simplifying the lessons taken from these various hadiths, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had divided his daily waking hours into three segments; each of it dedicated to specific objectives and tasks.

1. Daytime	Social, Political and Personal Affairs	As the religious and also the political leader of the Islamic state, this is the time he spent attending to the community needs from all perspectives of life; political, conflicts, religion, economy, marital, delegations from other nations and all the other man-to-man matters.
2. Evening	Family Time	This is when he spent time with his wives and family members. Despite his busy schedule in spreading the teachings of Islam and managing the Islamic state of Madinah, he dedicated quality time with his loved ones as a main responsibility.

3. Late Night Worship (*Ibadah*) and Spiritual Development This is the time he dedicates to Allah, where the time is spent with prayers, supplications (*dua*) and remembrance (*dhkir*). It was his intimate time with the Creator, seeking guidance and recharging his spiritual energy to perform his duty as the Prophet and leader of the Islamic *ummah*.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) also planned for major events of the year be it *umrah*, *hajj* or even wars. He would figure out in advance the appropriate delegation of authority as well as the segregation of duties to ensure things continue to run smoothly while he is away.

This formula of his has over time proved one significant fact; we do not need a lot of time to accomplish a lot of things. Over a short period of 23 years as a Prophet, with the help of divine intervention and wisdom, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has brought a phenomenal transformation at a significant magnitude that mankind has never witnessed before or after his demise. The benefit of his efforts is apparent in this world, be it in terms of humanity, economy, political, social and all the other aspects of life. As an exemplary leader, he has left us with the example and formula for us to learn, adopt and practise. This formula can simply be summarised as practising proper planning.

Guiding Principles of the “To Do List”

Now that we have a better understanding on the importance of planning our work, let us further analyse and gain a better understanding of the tool that we had discussed earlier, the “to do list”.

Let us go back to the story of the little notebook I used to have. Actually, I am very fortunate to discover this little secret at a young age. Over the years, my close relationship with my little notebook had taught me the secrets to planning my work. I have summarised this into a list of guiding principles that I believe can be used to develop and manage a good “to do list”.

1. Clear yet Simple

Obviously, the most important thing to do is to actually list down the tasks at hand on to the “to do list”. This forms the base and represents the fundamental purpose of the list’s existence. In order for the list to be effective, there needs to be certain minimum standards that guide the process of writing it. The methodology does not need to be complicated or technical. Like many other things in life, it is best kept simple. However, it should be structured enough so that it is easy for us to keep track. The following are a few pointers in coming up with a good “to do list”:

- Use simple words that reflect the actual task with enough clarity.**

Making it sound good is not important; remember that it is mainly for our own usage and personal reference, not for anyone else. Use plain and simple language to describe the tasks; words that we can understand at one glance. Avoid using bombastic and complicated words that we are not even sure of their meaning.

- Structure the list individually by using numbers or bullets.**

Avoid clustering multiple tasks into one item. Even if there are tasks that are inter-related, maintain it as separate tasks. This minimises the potential of us missing a task. There is no harm in detailing it into multiple subtasks – it helps to structure things better. For example, the task of

preparing a report. We can divide the task into smaller steps such as (i) request updates from stakeholders; (ii) update report; (iii) disseminate report, etc.

- **When necessary, divide the list into different segments or groupings.**

This is particularly important if the list consists of tasks that are truly different in nature from one another. It can be as simple as segregating between work and personal tasks. If someone is responsible for different areas or portfolios, dividing it according to the respective areas may be a good idea. Another way of looking at it is by grouping related tasks together under one main header. For example, listing down different types of reports under a “report” header. These are methods that would help us monitor multiple but related tasks effectively.

These guiding principles summarises one important point with regard to preparing the list – clear understanding of the tasks at hand is critical in coming up with a meaningful “to do list”. The less we understand, the more incomplete the list will be and the further away we are from delivering our work.

2. Accessible and Visibility

There is no point of having a comprehensive and complete “to do list” that is difficult to access. The list needs to be conveniently and easily accessible where we can view it whenever we need to. The closer it is kept to us, the better. It would be even better if we have it with us all the time.

The list needs to be made prominently visible so that we always remember to take look at it. Where we keep it makes a difference; it should not be kept at places that are difficult to reach or seldom visited. In other

words, the list should stand out prominently for us to continuously notice its existence so that it eventually becomes part of our lives.

Where the list actually resides is secondary; it can be written on something as traditional as a piece of paper or stored in something as advanced as a smartphone. As mentioned, what is more critical is to create the importance of its physical existence in our lives, which can be easily achieved if we are directly or indirectly forced to look at the list regularly. This increases the likelihood of us fully utilising the “to do list” as it is supposed to.

3. Set Deadlines

An open ended plan is never a good plan. There needs to be clarity on when we need to complete and deliver a task. This can be achieved by first specifying the target completion date or more known to us as deadlines. It would be good if we are able to explicitly specify the deadline somewhere on the “to do list”.

We can even take a step further to structure an overall timeline. I used to do this virtually in my mind rather than writing it down on the “to do list” but I do admit that it is not the best approach. A timeline that is physically visible is always better.

There is always the debate whether a timeline should be combined together with the “to do list” or managed separately. To me personally, it does not really matter as long as we are clear about the final target and focus our efforts on delivering it. There is no point of us complicating things but in the end fail to deliver.

Alternatively, we can implement timeline in its simplest form – by just specifying the target start and completion dates. This is always better than nothing.

4. Track and Update

A “to do list” is only useful if we are to actually use it. We therefore need to be disciplined enough to regularly track our progress against the list. Questions such as “how many tasks have been completed” or “how much progress we have made” should be answered and recorded on a regular basis so that we do not lose track of the current status of things.

This process may sound like a lot of work but in actual fact, there is no need for us to feel burdened by it. In its simplest form, it can just be the process of striking a task off the “to do list” once a task is completed. However, in reality, we more often than not still forget to perform this simple action, which results in a list that gives a wrong impression.

These two processes – track and update – enable us to continuously monitor as well as measure our progress and performance. It helps us to manage our overall plan to ensure that we deliver what needs to be delivered on time. If done right consistently, the processes will prompt us with warning indications whenever we are off track from our original plan. It enables us to take the necessary actions to close any gaps and get back on track.

What this really brings to the table is control. We now have more control over the work we do and how we manage its overall execution. This can be achieved through a simple process of tracking and updating regularly, in other words it is all about consistency.

5. Prioritise and Manage Time

When we discuss and deliberate the topic of planning, two key processes that are synonymous with the topic are prioritisation and time management. We will be spending a bit more time elaborating this principle as it is the core to managing workloads and their delivery.

Although these are two separate processes, both of them will only work well if they are working together or even better, embedded to each other. Come to think of it, in many instances, it may seem like they are a single process.

In principle, the matter that is being prioritised is the order of the tasks. Hence, theoretically, it is similar to time management, at least in terms of objective and spirit.

The Prophet (ﷺ) said: "Take advantage of five matters before five other matters: your youth before you become old; your health, before you fall sick; your wealth, before you become poor; your free time before you become preoccupied, and your life, before your death."

Narrated by Ibn Abbas in the Mustadrak of Hakim & Musnad Imam Ahmad

The famous hadith above justifies the importance of time management in our life and how Islam views the topic itself. It highlights Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)'s call for us to have a sense of urgency and act quickly before any of the five things happens – reminding us to act quickly before it is too late.

This reminder is also in line with the objective of prioritisation and time management in the context of a “to do list”; to complete the tasks at hand before it is too late or in simpler words – don’t miss the deadline!

So how do we actually prioritise work? What do we look at? There are few factors that we should consider when prioritising:

Importance

The first thing is to look at how important the task is and how much impact it has on the bigger picture. Therefore, the keyword here is “impact”. Impacts can be measured from various angles – financial, reputational, operational, business and others relevant measures. From another perspective, these are tasks that you just have to do to achieve an important goal.

Urgency

Next is to look at the urgency of the task; when does it need to be delivered? We have to remember, not all important things are urgent and vice versa. There are things that are important but need not be attended to immediately. There could also be cases where it is not that important but needs to be urgently taken care of. An example is replying to general queries by your superior. A guide in determining the level of urgency would be the deadline of a task; the sooner the deadline, the more urgent it is.

Task Dependencies

The other factor that we need to take into consideration is whether the task is related to another. Is it something that needs to be completed in order to start or complete another task? How much impact does it have on another task? At most times, this consideration can be

assessed together with the two factors discussed earlier. However, there might be instances where the task is “not important and not urgent” on its own but becomes “important and urgent” due to the dependency of another “important and urgent” task on the former’s completion.

The Art of Prioritising: The Four Baskets

I had mentioned earlier in my little notebook story that it was only later that I acquired a technique that helped me prioritise and manage time effectively. I was taught this technique by my mentor in the early days of my career. I found it to be sheer genius – it was simple yet it made so much sense.

I initially thought the technique was something that my mentor came up with but I found out later that it had been around since the 1950s. The principle behind the technique was quoted in a speech by former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954. Hence, the “Eisenhower Principle”.

The technique was later made popular by Steven R. Covey through a concept he labelled as “Time Management Matrix”. His version of the technique is described in the book titled “First Things First” that he co-authored with A. Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill in 1994. He had also mentioned it in his book, “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”.

To be honest, I had never actually read any of the books mentioned or attended any programmes on this topic. Hence, I would not be able to explain the technique as how they understood it. But instead, I will share the version of this technique that I had learned from my mentor. I personally think his version is simpler, more straightforward and easier to understand.

When my mentor taught me this technique many years ago, he used a simple analogy of having four baskets. Each basket represented a combination of two variables: “urgent” and “important”. The four baskets are illustrated in the matrix below.

		URGENT	NOT URGENT
		IMPORTANT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	URGENT	1	3
	NOT URGENT	2	4

We had briefly discussed the definition of these two variables in the previous section. The numbers in the box represents the order of priority to complete a task.

Basically, the tasks at hand are to be segregated into these four baskets by prioritising the tasks that need to be completed first. This would enable us to segregate it between “urgent” and “not urgent” tasks. Then, we further prioritise it according to its importance – the impact the tasks have on our overall work. Here we have managed to segregate the tasks to the “important” and “not important” axis.

“Urgent and important” tasks have the highest priority because it consists of tasks that are critical in achieving our main objectives and also tagged to tight deadlines. These are compulsory things that we just need to do to attain success; there are no two ways about it.

Where else, the “urgent but not important” tasks need to be completed quickly so that we can get it out of our way. These are things that usually distract us from the main objectives.

Next, we have the “important but not urgent” tasks. These tasks need to be attended to for long term benefits. We need to continue keeping it within radar and attend to it before it becomes urgent.

Last but not least, the useless basket – “not urgent and not important”. We can literally drop these tasks entirely as it eats up our productive time and does not contribute to our work. It normally consists of things that we intentionally do to distract ourselves such as gossiping with colleagues, surfing the web aimlessly, browsing social media and many other unproductive things.

I have been practising this prioritisation model for quite some time and personally found it to be effective. One thing for sure is that I feel less agitated when it comes to workload management; I feel that I am in more control. I can clearly plan the immediate things I need to attend to for the day and put away things that can wait for tomorrow or the days after.

It is all about managing our capacity to produce and deliver. The model assists in managing our physical, mental and emotional health so that we are in our best condition to perform. This is essential for us to consistently perform our job effectively and efficiently.

6. Keep it Clean

An important learning point from my little notebook experience that usually goes unnoticed would be maintaining a clean version of the “to do list”. I would not categorise this requirement as compulsory; it is more of a

best practice. However, I do personally feel that the practice is worthwhile elaborating so that it can be implemented as part of the “to do list” discipline.

There are various reasons that could crop up when we underutilise the “to do list”. It may sound picky but among the potential reason that might be used as an excuse is the physical condition of the list; how it is viewed by our naked eyes. In my earlier sharing, we had already discussed how we are psychologically influenced by the physical look of things. In the case of the “to do list”, it is only natural for our psychological preference to be inclined towards a cleaner sight rather than a messy one.

Due to this psychological fact, believe it or not, the effectiveness of the “to do list” would increase if we were to put consistent effort in maintaining the cleanliness of the list. We should always remember that it is always easier for our mind to process and manage a structured, clean and focused list rather than a messy and disorganised list.

Let us attempt to illustrate this fact. If we fail to put in the discipline to strike completed items off the list, the list would continue to expand containing both complete and incomplete tasks up to a certain point where the list literally becomes an eyesore. This is when our mind starts to find it difficult to process the contents of the list. This is a classic example of a situation where less information is sometimes better.

High dosages of unnecessary facts and information usually end up irritating us, which directly or indirectly have an impact on our efficiency and effectiveness. These are human traits that we cannot run away from; it is more difficult for us to behave well when we are irritated – this simply means that it is also more difficult for us to work or perform well when we are irritated. This happens for a simple reason, irritation affects our behaviour and our working behaviour is not an exception.

There are various methods of doing this in practice. We can start a new list every day or we can opt for any other methods that we are comfortable with, such as maintaining a register of “to do list” segregated by certain variables – it can be by dates, by function or any other variations, anything that works for us. We can adopt any method, so long as it avoids the list from becoming an eyesore.

7. Start the Day with It

There is one last principle that needs to be put in place for the “to do list” to be effective – to start the day with it. What this actually means is that before we actually start working on the long list of tasks already at hand, we should “work” on the “to do list” first.

We need to ensure that the contents of the list and the respective status are all up to date. If there are any prioritisations, cleaning up or updates that have not been done from the previous day’s list, it needs to be done first.

This step helps puts us on a clearer path and enables us to identify our short term goals for the day. It also keeps our momentum going without too many distractions – fewer distractions equal more efficiency.

Putting into Action: Building the Discipline

On normal days where business is as usual and routine, the “to do list” might not stand out as much as it should. However, it does not mean it is not as useful and effective. When it comes to routine work, the “to do list” helps us improve our efficiency in performing our tasks through a timely and structured discipline. These improvements that are built over time will increase our capabilities to deliver work faster without compromising on quality.

I had personally benefited from this as for many years of my career; I was running a one-man show, to be precise for about 11 years. Although I eventually managed a few functions under my care, strategic planning had always been my forte. I handled this particular function singlehandedly for more than 8 years. This situation left me with no other choice but to continuously find ways of improving myself to work more efficiently and effectively. In other words, there was no other way; I had to learn to work faster and be better at what I do to be able to cope with the work volume, demands and deadlines.

The good thing about strategic planning is that besides the ad hoc requests and projects, the other functions are pretty much routine. An example of this would be reporting. When it comes to reporting, the function mainly involves preparation of periodic reports where the due dates are more or less the same each month. The report preparation process is in itself routine where the same steps are repeated during each reporting cycle. Hence, the more you prepare it, the more familiar you are with it and the better you get at preparing it.

How did the “to do list” helped me in this situation?

First and foremost, the “to do list” helped me practise preparing the report. It allowed me to pace myself with the routine steps so that I could complete the report faster after each cycle. As I repetitively plan and execute each step listed on my “to do list”, I would try to improve myself at doing the task so that I could eventually complete it faster in the next cycle. This is what is meant by pacing work routines; it is a process of improving oneself on a particular task over time so that it could be delivered more efficiently the next time. This is what we meant by “practice makes perfect”.

Secondly, the “to do list” helps build the discipline in planning ahead of time. This was possible to do because the tasks involved are sequential and

repetitive. Planning eventually became an automatic process where at the beginning of each month, I would list down all the required steps in an orderly manner and follow through with the necessary actions as and when I reached a checkpoint. Adhering to this discipline helped ensure the reports are submitted on time. With consistent practice, we will end up completing it way before the deadline. This is when you feel the taste of satisfaction; when we are able to deliver beyond expectations.

Putting into Action: Rush Hours

The “to do list” comes in really handy during critical and difficult times. This usually involves major projects or tasks that have tight deadlines and high expectations. These are the type of projects or tasks that, if not managed well, would produce high level of stress. Results are expected to be produced fast and yet perfect, which may lead to rushed and chaotic situations.

It is during rushed situations like these that many of us decide to just act on the tasks instead of planning it first. Silly mistakes starts to happen and most times we end up redoing the whole thing all over again.

Somewhere in 2005, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to be part of the due diligence team for the largest merger and acquisition (M&A) exercise in the insurance industry at that time. It was the merger of five entities from two of the largest local insurance groups. In total it involved three conventional insurers and two takaful operators. The intention was to build the largest local insurance group that would be able to compete with the big foreign players.

I was only 24 years old back then and it was only my third year working. It was one of the most exciting times in my career especially at that very young age where I was hungry for knowledge and exposure.

I was part of the business work stream team together with my boss, who was also my mentor. Our work stream was tasked to perform due diligence from the business perspective for all five entities. The team was led by my mentor's boss, who had just retired from the Group CEO position.

The team mainly consisted of the three of us; me, my boss and his boss. There were a few others but they worked independently. As you can see from the pyramid, it is very obvious that I was the one that had to do all the necessary administrative and paperwork. That was a lot for a young man; jotting down meeting notes, preparing reports, writing minutes, arranging meetings. It was basically anything under the sun that the bosses themselves do not do – the list was endless.

The timeframe given to complete the due diligence exercise was short and tight. As the project was large, it involved many parties and stakeholders. We had to deal with the local shareholder, foreign partner, consultants and also staff from all five entities.

We had to quickly evaluate and assess the businesses of the entities, which included reviewing and understanding the different channels, business lines, products on the shelf, financial performances, infrastructure, business opportunities, operational issues. The list goes on and on.

At the end of the assessment, we were required to produce an overall report highlighting our findings, provide recommendation on the feasibility of the merger from the business perspective as well as highlight business opportunities and strengths that the new merged entity should focus on once the merger is completed.

A lot of things were happening each day; we were having meetings at three different locations, listening to presentations by different parties, interviewing people from various levels and functions, reading numerous

management reports, preparing progress reports and so much more. It reached a stage where at one time, we were required to submit a daily progress report to the evaluation team at the end of each day.

It was a hectic period but also an extremely fun one, at least for me.

It was during this time that I fully utilised the usage of the “to do list” to manage the long yet dynamic list of tasks that I had to do every day. It reached a point I had to establish two “to do lists”. The first list focuses on short term goals, which were basically tasks that needed to be completed for that day.

The second list focuses on medium to long term goals that highlights the major deliverables and key tasks in the upcoming days ahead. It involved a lot of prioritisation; urgent and important tasks were put on the first list and less urgent ones were pushed to the second. I repeated this process religiously every day throughout the whole due diligence exercise.

There were times that it was too much to juggle for a 24 year old especially with two experienced and demanding bosses breathing down my neck all the time. I can still remember staying back late by myself on one particular Friday night to complete and submit an important report to the evaluation team. It was past midnight before I managed to email the report out.

It was only after I had sent out the report that the bosses realised it contained a lot of mistakes. I got a good scolding from my boss that night despite the efforts and long hours I had spent alone in front of the computer to complete the report. I was completely exhausted and burnt out.

However, at the end of the day, what needed to be delivered needed to be delivered and it needed to be delivered right, there is no excuse.

I had to come back to the office first thing the very next morning to redo the report all over again.

I can still recall that Saturday clearly. Due to the mistakes I made, my two bosses also had to come over during the weekend to work. The office was practically empty and mind you, one of them was the ex-Group CEO. I wonder how he actually felt back then. That was how much trouble I got myself and my bosses into. They were literally standing behind me while I was correcting the report. After all the drama, we celebrated with a good lunch together.

Anyway, back to the topic, if it was not because of the "to do list", incidents such as this would have happened more often. The rush, pressures, tight deadlines, voluminous reports and long list of tasks would have gone out of hand. I would have imagined myself breaking down numerous times due to the tremendous stress and pressure.

Nevertheless, I survived because of the discipline I had put in, which guided me to complete the tasks in an orderly and structured manner. The "to do list" helped me deliver what was required of me but what was more important, it managed to keep my sanity intact throughout the whole experience.

This whole exercise was one if not the biggest achievement I had in my early working days; not many 24 year olds got to be part of and experience such an exciting high profile exercise.

The proudest moment for me was when we finally completed the exercise and submitted the final report. The end report ran to about 80 pages. I am not sure if anyone actually read the entire report but nevertheless, I was satisfied with the outcome. And again, I managed to achieve such great results thanks to the "to do list".

Putting into Action: Beyond Oneself

Although I have been using the “to do list” on a personal basis for a long time but it was not until I introduced it to others that I really saw its true potential and effectiveness. To start with, the usage of “to do list” was more accidental rather than formally introduced to my life.

The opportunity to introduce and “impose” this method on others came as I climbed the corporate ladder and started to have my own team. I would formally established a *big picture* “to do list” for my staff from his or her first day of work. The list is structured and is in the form of a table, which would look something like the sample below:

No.	Tasks	Deadline	Person in Charge	Stakeholders	Status

I would then track the progress of the tasks from time to time together with my staff. It made life easier for both my staff and me; the employees know how to manage their tasks and it was easier for me to interfere and guide whenever they got off track. We managed to build a harmonious relationship and I was still able to impose the necessary pressure required to ensure that the work is delivered.

The effectiveness became more obvious when I was given the chance to be the caretaker for a department that was facing various issues due to the departure of its former Head. The main issue when I took over was that there were so many things happening at one time but no one was able to really identify and explain what they were.

So, I had the team go through an exercise of putting everything they knew and were doing into a “to do list”. We ended up having over fifty tasks and projects at hand. We then divided the workload, defined responsibilities and set

deadlines for everyone to work on. To ensure we continue to be on top of things and be in control, we tracked the progress of the list on a regular basis. All the team members were required to provide updates on the “to do list” on a bi-weekly basis and checkpoint meetings were held as and when required.

After that painful exercise of listing the long list, we were just left with a nightmare of having so many things on our plate. This was obviously much better compared to the earlier nightmare where there were too many uncertainties on the things that were happening; no one really had the idea of how many things we had to do, who was doing what and what was the progress of each item.

Thanks to the “to do list”, we can now be prompted when things go wrong or are off track, which gives us the ability to address it with the responsible person in a timely manner. This is an example of implementing the “to do list” in a broader setting; in managing a department.

Soul behind the Body

The “to do list”, however, is merely a tool and not the solution. Behind every tool is still a human being, i.e. us.

We are the ones who make the tool a solution or otherwise. It is not only about utilisation of the tool but fundamentally it is about us, the person using the tool. Things only get done if, and only if, we decide to do it; planning without execution gets us nowhere.

Secondly, things only get done well, if executed right: the right mindset, attitude and discipline; any tool is just an enabler. It is all about approaching both planning and execution with positivity, objectivity, focus, determination, urgency and consistency.

These high note spirits are then translated into the tool and the work itself as we push hard for delivery and results. Hence, if it does not start with us, even if we are given the best tools, we will still continuously fail – a body without a soul is a dead body, literally.