

3. EVERYTHING WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ACHIEVING ACADEMIC SUCCESS

We want to be happy today and tomorrow. With unlimited potential to tap, there should be no need to limit our happiness to any one thing or wait to be happy until some goal is attained or until we have lots of money or fame. Instead, our experience so far in life indicates that when we have “meaningful” moments in a day we feel happy. On the other hand, when time is wasted in doing something meaningless we feel lousy. We feel our time is meaningful when we accomplish something, even if it is a simple chore that we complete to our satisfaction. Inner stirrings to do something creative make us constantly perform different activities. We must know how to channel the energy to finish the big and small activities we undertake. We have to demand the best of ourselves and attain the goals to our satisfaction. Otherwise, we will feel frustrated. Regardless of whether a goal has been attained or not, our constant goal should be that we live a meaningful life -- today and tomorrow. It is the yesterday that we cannot do much about except to take appropriate corrective action, instead of brooding over it or blaming someone or ourselves. If the efforts towards reaching a goal have not been sufficient, instead of feeling dissatisfied or unhappy, we should take into account how much we have accomplished and be satisfied with our work so far and continue working. We have to be proactive. This means acting in anticipation of future problems, needs or changes.

Attitude is one of the most important things. Charles Swindoll says about attitude:

“The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company...a church...a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past...we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way.

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cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have and that is our attitude...I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you...we are in charge of our Attitudes.”

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Attitude, which means outlook, frame of mind, perspective, or position, is the only way we can make ourselves happy or unhappy, contented or depressed. As the quote says, we are in charge of our attitudes. We have to approach everything we do daily with this attitude. There are so many things that need to be taken care of and need our attention. If, instead of getting all stressed out about the things we have to do, we prioritize and do the things one at a time with full attention and not thinking about other thing, we get satisfaction.

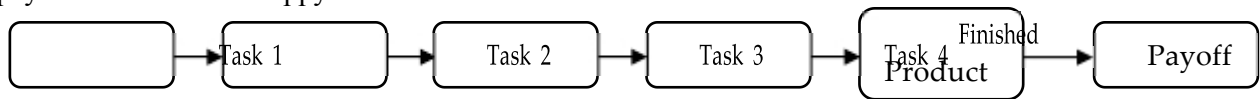
Chapters one and two help you to develop the right attitude. The attitude should be that we believe in ourselves, we believe that whatever we are doing will be beneficial to us and that we can do it successfully. With this attitude we will do the task at hand with interest. The interest leads to appreciation for what we are doing and that we have the opportunity to do it. This generates confidence in us. This confidence allows us to persevere, to complete the thing we have undertaken. If you ask successful people, they will say that persistence helped them to succeed.

With this attitude we have to approach educating ourselves. Education brings meaning to our lives. It helps us equip ourselves with mental tools to express our innate talents. It gives us

choices. It helps us to achieve the goals. It helps us to widen our horizons. That is the reason we need to study various subjects. We come to college with some goal in our mind. We want to get degrees-- A.A., A.A.S., B.A., B.S., M.A., M.S., Ph. D. etc.-- and to attain our goal.

Once we decide to get an education and to enroll in a college, we must learn how to manage our academic and non-academic responsibilities without stress. In this book the reader will find tested tools to do this. We must discover what obstacles prevent us from achieving the goals. One obstacle is that we have to take care of so many things every day that we first consider the thing that needs immediate attention. While doing that we are reminded or told of another important thing that needs to be done, or another deadline to meet, and our attention gets diverted. Now we have to do two things at the same time. This is multitasking. We keep on doing different things without accomplishing our major goals. Everything remains incomplete. That leads to frustration and stress. What we are doing is called bad multi-tasking. Instead, everything we do that takes some amount of time and effort should be treated as a “project.”

At this point, we need to define a project. A “project” is a sequence of tasks that are logically arranged to achieve some goal. A “task” is a unit of activity. The tasks cannot be rearranged in a random manner. There is a finished product at the end of the project. It is called a “deliverable.” It may be tangible such as an object or a gadget, or an intangible-- just knowing that a goal has been reached. There is some payoff as a consequence of completing the project. It may be a monetary reward. Whatever the project, once we finish it, we feel a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, accompanied by an increase in confidence. That is also our payoff. It makes us happy.



Let us play a game of multi-tasking. I owe this game to Alan Barnard from South Africa, a well-known teacher of Theory of Constrains. Play this game and experience the feeling you have.

The game is given on the next page.

Explanation of the game

Let us assume you have a portfolio of three projects to finish. Each project has twenty tasks. The first project is writing the numbers 1 through 20 vertically in order. The second project is to write letters A through T, vertically, one below the other. The third project is to draw a triangle ▲, a circle ○, and a diamond ◆ one below the other in that order.

The game of multitasking consists of two activities. Take two sheets of blank paper. Draw two lines lengthwise on a paper making three equal columns on each sheet. Start your stopwatch or look at your clock.

1. On one sheet, take one column, finish the first project. Mark your time for completion of the first project. After that, in the second column, do the second project, and mark time. After you are finished with the second, start the third project in the third column. Note the total time.
2. Now, do the three projects in the following manner. Do one task of each project in using the three columns. To begin, write 1 in the first, A in the second, and draw a triangle in the third

column. Then go on to the next task in each, and so on. Finish the three projects and note the total time.

Which mode takes less time? First or second? Guess and check after finishing the project.

<u>Project 1</u>	<u>Project 2</u>	<u>Project 3</u>
1	A	Δ
2	B	O
3	C	◇
4	D	Δ
5	E	O
6	F	◇
7	G	Δ
8	H	O
9	I	◇
10	J	Δ
11	K	O
12	L	◇
13	M	Δ
14	N	O
15	O	◇
16	P	Δ
17	Q	O
18	R	◇
19	S	Δ
<u>20</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>O</u>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

The point of the game is to convince the player that constant shifting from one task to another takes away speed and concentration. If we move from the first project of numbers to writing letters, we must think of which letter to write, and after that, if we move to the third project, we must decide which figure needs to be drawn – a triangle, circle or a diamond. These decisions take a long time. If you do the three projects one after the other, it would take you at most three minutes. But constantly moving from one task of one project to a task of another takes considerably longer to finish all three tasks. Bad multitasking makes each project take longer and should never be done.

If this is true, then how do we carry out multiple tasks that we need to accomplish during the day? It would be so boring to do just one project all day long. The key is to “divide and conquer.” We divide the project into small parts or tasks and make a mental marker called a “milestone” at the end of a set of tasks. We should reward ourselves in some way-- taking a break for exercising, eating or entertaining ourselves for some time—when we reach each milestone. We do this intuitively in many projects we do.

Project Plan²: We must plan how to execute a project(s). We have seen earlier what a project and its tasks are. A project plan looks at the whole sequence of tasks. Being proactive means that we have to remain in charge of our own project. For instance, if the goal is to get a degree, we look at the whole series of courses that we need to take. In a huge institutional or company project, we may play different roles. In this case, the project is our role and the tasks we need to do. However, we should not get overwhelmed by any project. We should not think, “Oh, when am I going to finish all this?” No one has asked us to do everything in one day or right away and by our own effort alone. We must relax and enjoy what we are doing; we must concentrate fully on what has to be done at this moment; we must relate to people surrounding us in a friendly manner. That will make the time on task meaningful. We have to know that people such as our teachers, friends and relatives want us to succeed in whatever we are doing and are ready to help in whatever way they can. Even strangers come to help a person in need. We must meaningfully use our time, especially when we get breaks, such as weekend, spring break, or holidays. Basically, we should spend some time in catching up, overcoming our difficulties or studying a topic deeper.

Academic Success: We need to take many courses and should aspire to get an A in each course. This is our project for the semester. We should be in charge and take responsibility for finishing the course syllabus. For each course, there are many lessons. But if the lesson-wise syllabus is not available, work with the instructor to discover his/her emphasis on topics in terms of time to be allocated for each topic. For each project there are various resources. There are people resources to help us carry out the project—our family³, employers, mentors, teachers, tutors and classmates, and colleagues; and there are financial and comfort resources--- our family, job, scholarships, and student loans --which help us keep working towards our goals without worry

² Reference: Newbold, Robert C., *Project Management in the Fast Lane*, 1998, St. Lucie Press, Boca Raton, FL, USA. Also thanks to Jim Cox, University of Georgia for the stimulating discussions in October-November 2007.

³ We must consider also the fact that in some families and friends there are conflicts and conditions not conducive to study. If we are equipped with Thinking Process tools, they can be used to resolve conflicts, solve any problems, and make wise decisions based on the various possible consequences those decisions might engender. These are discussed in the last chapter of this guide. There are also professional counselors and agencies that can provide us with alternative choices to keep us focused on our goal.

and in a protected environment. For a course, the instructor is the primary source; the tutors are supplementary resources. There are printed materials and web materials which we also should consider as secondary resources. To the best of ability and time we should make timely use of these resources. We must respect all resources and acknowledge from time to time where we get the help from. Acknowledgment and recognition help everyone to improve in their efforts. It brings satisfaction and happiness to all parties involved.

In any project we must consider fluctuations due to unseen factors. We must know Murphy's law: "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong." When we plan a project we should take

Murphy's Law into account and plan for some flexibility to change course if needed. Taking care of all these factors lets us see how to take a systematic approach to finishing a project.

If you take a single course as a project that has a definite duration and a clearly laid out path, finishing it successfully will give you a practice in finishing your full course of study as a series of projects. It will also give you practice completing more complicated projects that you will face in your career and life, and help you to live a more meaningful life.

Critical Chain Project Management (CCPM) of a course: "A critical path" in managing any project is determined by analyzing the longest chain of tasks in a project. A "critical chain" is the set of tasks that determine the overall duration of a project. The critical chain project management (CCPM) involves making use of all resources efficiently to accomplish the project. For example, the critical path for a course is one semester.

For doing the CCPM of a course you have to be proactive. By managing yourselves and your time, you can finish any course efficiently to your satisfaction. You should realize that the time in the syllabus allocated to the topics by the instructor is the average class time that he/she has to take so that most students in the class can understand them. That does not mean you have to be bound by that time. It entirely depends on you. Based on your background and prerequisite knowledge, you may master a topic more quickly or more slowly than the average student. Also Murphy might strike. If it takes longer than the usual time, you should take this into account by working harder and carving out the required time. It is important that you master the topic at hand. From experience you will find that when you work consistently on a subject, it eventually yields and it will take you less time to finish the remaining topics.

Focus Factor: You must concentrate fully on what has to be done at this moment. Whatever your past experience has been, it does not matter at this moment. You need not worry what the future will bring you, because it is not here yet. Being in the moment relieves all stress. If it is a mathematics word problem, do not freeze because of your past experience, or worry about what the answer will be. Just read what is given and what is required at this step. After doing that step, go on to the next step. By focusing in the moment, you focus all your energy on doing what needs to be done. Multitasking is discouraged in CCPM as we saw in the game on page 10.

The "divide and conquer" tactic should be used to work on a particular topic. In most subjects, topics may be divided into subtopics. In mathematics, for example, there may be different types of computational problems that are found in exercises to illustrate a concept. To master such a topic, you do not have to do all problems of the set, but it is necessary to do problems of all types. Do two or three typical problems of a particular type. Understand the pattern. This will give you confidence that you can now do any problems of that type. Then go on to the next type.

Continue until the topic is finished. Confirm your confidence with the tutor or instructor, or if no tutor is available for the course, by taking the initiative to show your work to the instructor. In other courses, such as English or History, where computational problems are not usually given, seek guidance from the instructor as to how to master the course. Basically, the point is to develop the confidence of a “conqueror.”

If there is a weekly test in a course, you should finish the topics for the test one day before the test and use the last day to reinforce the difficult concepts only. Some instructors give periodic tests with a week’s notice. In such cases, you should plan to complete studying the topics for the test one week before the class test. For midterm and final examinations, you should allot two weeks to finish all the topics and spend those two weeks mastering difficult topics, doing practice tests and helping or discussing the topics with other classmates. These activities lead to a deeper understanding of the course. Under ideal conditions, try finishing the course in half the time indicated by the instructor.⁴With the remaining time, you may be able to take advantage of an accelerated program with instructors who can help you to finish the next course in the sequence at the same time you are completing the current course. You might not get credit for the course you did not take formally, but you can get an exemption, which might allow you to finish a more advanced course the next semester. Planning to finish the topics before the assigned time gives you a buffer to protect yourself against unexpected events. This time is called a “project buffer.” When activities are not completed on time and start to cut into the assigned buffer, you should be alarmed, make an extra effort and get extra help from instructor/tutor/web to minimize the use of the buffer. You should never let the entire buffer be consumed.

To avoid stress and suffer
Never cross the buffer

A whole team of resources is available to help you achieve your goals and complete your projects before the project buffer is needed. But you have to approach the instructor and tutor in advance to find a time suitable for them to help you to your and their satisfaction. The time needed for this notice is called a “resource buffer.” The tutor or instructor may not be able to help you at the last minute. Sometimes the tutor or instructor may not immediately have time available. Without feeling afraid or snubbed, make an appointment and show up prepared with your difficulties or work to confirm that you have mastered the topic. Besides, regular communication with tutors and instructors makes the course a lot of fun. In informal conversations, you will learn interesting points not mentioned in a book or class. Your peer tutor could be a role model for you, and you could later become a tutor and role model for others. The instructor could become a mentor in your junior or senior years with whom you could do independent research, be able to earn a fellowship or scholarship, and accomplish something even beyond your dreams. The instructor may be able to write you a strong recommendation for graduate school or a job.

Multiple Courses: Develop a realistic schedule. Approach counselors and advisors to help you. Take a balanced set of courses – some technical and some not, but not all hard or all easy. Manage the project and resource buffers by using the days when the course does not meet and weekends to complete the various tasks of each course.

⁴ There are such accelerated basic skills and developmental courses in mathematics in some colleges such as Medgar Evers College, CUNY

If you practice the principles discussed here, you will enjoy every course. You might even be able to take and finish more courses and finish your required courses earlier.

