



Positively Legal: The Art of Prioritizing What Matters Most

Skills and Professional Development



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You started the year a huge forward momentum — you have a list of goals you want to achieve this year. You even wrote out the daily habits to support those goals.

If you were stuck, you may have drawn some inspiration from the list of habits seven in-house counsel identified as their priorities in [January's Positively Legal](#) column. Or you may have read through my previous articles on the importance of healthy habits for a positive mindset from my [previous article](#) and [how goal setting can help us achieve more while improving our health and happiness](#).

But what do you do if your list is too ambitious? What if your goals and habits are way too many to achieve in the next five years, let alone this one?

This is what I faced in the second week of January when I realized my list was too long and I would likely stretch myself too thin while achieving nothing much and worrying about what I wasn't achieving at 3 am. So, I set about finding inspiration for how to reduce a list of meaningful goals and habits to those which mattered most and then worked out how I can actually build some of the goals and habits into my day.

How to spend your outrageously short 4,000 weeks

Author and columnist [Oliver Burkeman](#) has worked out that if you live to 80, you have about 4,000

weeks on earth. His book [Four Thousand Weeks](#) sets out to identify (with quite a bit of humor), how best to use the limited time we have. I used three of his principles to significantly reduce my initial list:

- *Pay yourself first* — If you have a really important activity (exercise, being creative, or nurturing a relationship), don't try to fit it in around the demands of your time. The only way to do it is to add it into your day (even for a short amount of time) and do the other things around it.



Incorporate your hobbies into your daily routine. Inspiring / [Shutterstock.com](#)

- *Limit your work in progress* — Burkeman says that “the most appealing way to resist the truth about your finite time is to initiate a large number of projects at once; that way, you get to feel as though you’re keeping plenty of irons in the fire and making progress on all fronts.”

You achieve nothing but can bounce around from one project to the next if you become bored or it becomes difficult. The solution? “Fix a hard upper limit on the number of things that you allow yourself to work on at any given time,” management experts Jim Benson and Tonia DeMaria Barry suggest no more than three items.

“Once you’ve selected those tasks, all other incoming demands on your time must wait until one of the three items has been completed, thereby freeing up a slot.” For Burkeman, a “happy consequence was that I found myself effortlessly breaking down my projects into manageable chunks, a strategy I’d long agreed to in theory but never properly implemented.”



Creating a manageable to-do list will help with organizing tasks and staying focused on reaching your goals. Net Vector / Shutterstock.com

- *Resist the allure of middling priorities* — Burkeman tells a story attributed to Warren Buffett in which his personal pilot asked him how to set priorities. Buffett allegedly suggested making a list ranking the top 25 things he wanted to out of life and organizing time around the top five. Surprisingly, the next 20 in the list should be avoided at all costs — “because they’re the ambitions insufficiently important to him to form the core of his life yet seductive enough to distract him from the ones that really matter.”

Prioritize for meaning

I went back to an [earlier article](#) in which I considered how we can craft meaning from our lives. I thought about Shawn Achor’s suggestions from “[Before Happiness](#),” and in “[Big Potential](#),” where he suggested identifying “meaning markers,” which are things in many areas of your life that matter to you: career advancement, better health, etc. and he suggested being specific about your meaning markers. For example, “find more time to read” or “find more time to do some pro bono work.” He then suggested asking two things on a daily basis:

- “What is one action I will take today that will get me closer to my meaningful goals?”
- “What pulls me off my path?”



Take time every day to consider what distracts you from meeting your meaningful goals in life.
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He also suggested identifying how to connect with others on a deeper level and finding opportunities to “brighten someone’s day because of your interactions” — I’m using this as an additional “cheat” priority. It isn’t included in my short list of goals, but it is something I can add to my day quite easily.

I also took inspiration from [Tal Ben Shahar](#) on how to prioritize goals in “[Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment](#)” where he summarized research that not all goals are equal to our happiness — “People seeking greater well-being would be well advised to focus on the pursuit of (a) goals involving growth, connection, and contribution rather than goals involving money, beauty, and popularity and (b) goals that are interesting and personally important to them rather than goals they feel forced or pressured to pursue.”

The research suggests that we are better off pursuing “self-concordant goals — these are goals we pursue out of deep personal conviction and/or a strong interest.” For goals to be self-concordant, the person has to feel that she chose them rather than that they were imposed on her, that they stem from a desire to express part of herself rather than from the need to impress others.

Refine your granular tasks using the Eisenhower matrix

Once I had my set of priorities and goals, I looked at whether the Eisenhower matrix could help me with the more granular tasks I identified under each of the goals. The Eisenhower matrix is the four quadrant model used to determine the priority of tasks. Steven Covey used it in [The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#).

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	Quadrant I: Urgent & Important	Quadrant II: Not Urgent & Important
NOT IMPORTANT	Quadrant III: Urgent & Not Important	Quadrant IV: Not Urgent & Not Important

Source: Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*

Inspired by President Eisenhower who thought that time management needed to be effective and efficient. And to become successful, you have to clearly navigate priorities based on urgency and importance. The idea behind the matrix is to:

- **Do** the tasks in Quadrant 1 (Important and Urgent).
- **Schedule** tasks in Quadrant II (Important but Not Urgent) as these could be development and strategy for your goals, such as exercise and networking.
- **Delegate** tasks in Quadrant III (Urgent but Not Important) as these could be administrative tasks that someone might do for you, e.g., you have a side hustle and need to upload blog posts.
- **Delete** tasks in Quadrant IV (Not Urgent and Not Important). These are distractions and can include spending too much time on social media watching cat videos or eating junk food when your main goal is to get healthy.

Having procrastinated through the first weeks of January with a list too long to manage and too many excuses to procrastinate, I now have a much shorter priority list and take final inspiration from Dr. Sues: “You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself in any direction you choose.”

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Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.