

# LEVERAGE™

NEWS AND IDEAS FOR THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNER



## Getting Organized from the Inside Out

BY MARILYN PAUL



My desk was piled high with papers and empty coffee cups. I usually delivered excellent, timely work, but at a great personal cost—late-night work sessions, anguished preparation time, and frantic searches for missing information. Some of the intensity was due to the inherent nature of my work as a consultant. But much of the pressure came from me. *What was my problem?*

For many of us, as the new year approaches, our thoughts turn to issues of what Peter Senge terms “personal mastery.” In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge defines personal mastery as “the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively.” Through “new year’s resolutions” and other change efforts, we seek to learn more about ourselves, break unproductive habits, and thereby create a more satisfying future.

But identifying our growth areas and actually making lasting change are two different challenges, especially when it comes to sorting through the clutter in our lives. It is far easier to say “I want to arrive at meetings on time” or “I need to keep better track of client files” than to put those desires into action. I know

the difficulty of making this transition from personal experience—I struggled for years to organize my life.

What is organization and why is it important? It’s not just about freedom from clutter or having “everything in its place.” Being organized means:

- **Finding** what you want when you need it,
- **Taking action** when you want,
- **Completing** your tasks in a timely way,
- **Keeping agreements**, and
- **Maintaining presence of mind**; that is, paying attention to what you want to focus on.

This definition is not about external standards of neatness—it is about having choices and being in charge of your life. So, how do you break the cycle of disorganization?

### How Do I Break the Cycle?

To organized people, the answer is straightforward: You “just do it.” You file and throw out the mess on the desk; you make more of an effort to be on time. The problem is that, for many of us, simply *deciding* to change doesn’t produce change.

We can get help in breaking the cycle of disorganization from systems thinking, Senge’s “fifth” discipline. Systems thinking shows us that we have difficulty solving chronic problems because we misunderstand their complexity—we end up addressing the symptoms

instead of the root cause. “Pushing harder” to address ongoing issues—such as undertaking a massive office clean-up effort—rarely produces lasting change, because we end up ignoring the deeper structures that perpetuate the system. If we don’t change those underlying structures, the stacks of papers will quickly reappear.

The tools of systems thinking can help us identify hidden structures and patterns, giving us leverage to unlock a “stuck” system. Systems thinkers use the image of an iceberg to show that only a small percentage of any system is visible on the surface. Events and patterns of behavior take place above the “water line,” where we can observe them. Examples of events and trends might include losing important phone numbers, arriving late for meetings, and living with a lot of clutter.

These patterns in turn are influenced by the structures that we can’t see—most of the iceberg is under water. For instance, we can’t view our mental models, the filters that shape our perceptions. And, without concentrated effort, we’re not aware of our thoughts, which stem from our mental models and deep beliefs. They are often so fleeting that we are unaware of them; yet this constant stream of thinking directs our actions.

For instance, I used to think, *“I’m in a hurry. I’ll just stick this*

*receipt in my pocket for now and collect them all later.*” These fleeting thoughts led to countless hours of searching for receipts later. But without focused attention to surfacing those thoughts and the deep beliefs underlying them, I was unable to change my behavior in a lasting way. Deep beliefs that influence handling receipts may include “Money doesn’t matter,” “Organizing is a waste of time,” and “Someone else should take care of these details.”

### The “CHI” Method

The alternative to “just do it” is to change the hidden structures that guide our behavior. To do so, we need to identify the deep beliefs that drive our thinking and, in turn, our actions. Examining choices (C), changing habits (H), and deepening insight about your mental models (I) are core to this approach. I call it the “CHI” method, because *chi* (pronounced “chee”) is a Chinese word for energy. When we’re disorganized, we often deplete our energy reserves, because we’re struggling with our own chaos as well as everything else. Clearing up gives us a chance to redirect our energy toward projects that have the most personal meaning for us. As we

effectively sort through the disorder—and change some of our deeper beliefs—we free up our energy.

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The key is to make the connection between your ways of thinking and your habits. Start by learning—without self-condemnation—how you do things now. Become familiar with your moment-to-moment actions and the accompanying thoughts and feelings. Once you have delved beneath the surface of your personal “iceberg,” then you can make new choices, which, over time, can lead to new, more productive habits. These steps form a cycle, which you engage many times, each time getting to know yourself better and taking more effective action.

For example, for Brian, a lawyer, the critical issue was lateness. His colleagues and clients all knew that he could not be counted on to meet deadlines. These patterns of behavior were threatening his business. After

taking the time to explore his deep beliefs, Brian learned that he believed he was most effective under enormous pressure. For that reason, he left the preparation of briefs to the last minute. By identifying his deep beliefs (I) and the habits (H) they fostered, Brian was able to shift those mental models and make more conscious choices (C) about his behavior.

The CHI method is not a magic bullet; unlike the “just do it” approach, there are no quick fixes here. However, with dedication, patience, and persistence, you will see real change in your work and home environment and in yourself—all of which leads to more time and attention for what really matters in your life. ▲

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