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Peter Bregman

On: [Managing Yourself](#), [Leadership Development](#), [Communication](#)



Peter Bregman

Peter Bregman speaks, writes, and consults on leadership. He is the CEO of [Bregman Partners, Inc.](#), and the author of [Point B: A Short Guide To Leading a Big Change.](#)

Two Lists You Should Look at Every Morning

11:00 AM Wednesday May 27, 2009 | [Comments \(51\)](#)

I was late for my meeting with the CEO of a technology company and I was emailing him from my iPhone as I walked onto the elevator in his company's office building. I stayed focused on the screen as I rode to the sixth floor. I was still typing with my thumbs when the elevator doors opened and I walked out without looking up. Then I heard a voice behind me, "Wrong floor." I looked back at the man who was holding the door open for me to get back in; it was the CEO, a big smile on his face. He had been in the elevator with me the whole time. "Busted," he said.

The world is moving fast and it's only getting faster. So much technology. So much information. So much to understand, to think about, to react to. A friend of mine recently took a new job as the head of learning and development at a mid-sized investment bank. When she came to work her first day on the job she turned on her computer, logged in with the password they had given her, and found 385 messages already waiting for her.

So we try to speed up to match the pace of the action around us. We stay up until 3 am trying to answer all our emails. We twitter, we facebook, and we link-in. We scan news websites wanting to make sure we stay up to date on the latest updates. And we salivate each time we hear the beep or vibration of a new text message.

But that's a mistake. The speed with which information hurtles towards us is unavoidable (and it's getting worse). But trying to catch it all is counterproductive. The faster the waves come, the more deliberately we need to navigate. Otherwise we'll get tossed around like so many particles of sand, scattered to oblivion. Never before has it been so important to be grounded and intentional and to know what's important.

Never before has it been so important to say "No." No, I'm not going to read that article. No, I'm not going to read that email. No, I'm not going to take that phone call. No, I'm not

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going to sit through that meeting.

It's hard to do because maybe, just maybe, that next piece of information will be the key to our success. But our success actually hinges on the opposite: on our willingness to risk missing some information. Because trying to focus on it all is a risk in itself. We'll exhaust ourselves. We'll get confused, nervous, and irritable. And we'll miss the CEO standing next to us in the elevator.

A study of car accidents by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute put cameras in cars to see what happens right before an accident. They found that in 80% of crashes the driver was distracted during the three seconds preceding the incident. In other words, they lost focus — dialed their cell phones, changed the station on the radio, took a bite of a sandwich, maybe checked a text — and didn't notice that something changed in the world around them. Then they crashed.

The world is changing fast and if we don't stay focused on the road ahead, resisting the distractions that, while tempting, are, well, distracting, then we increase the chances of a crash.

Now is a good time to pause, prioritize, and focus. Make two lists:

List 1: Your Focus List (the road ahead)

What are you trying to achieve? What makes you happy? What's important to you? Design your time around those things. Because time is your one limited resource and no matter how hard you try you can't work 25/8.

List 2: Your Ignore List (the distractions)

To succeed in using your time wisely, you have to ask the equally important but often avoided complementary questions: what are you willing not to achieve? What doesn't make you happy? What's not important to you? What gets in the way?

Some people already have the first list. Very few have the second. But given how easily we get distracted and how many distractions we have these days, the second is more important than ever. The leaders who will continue to thrive in the future know the answers to these questions and each time there's a demand on their attention they ask whether it will further their focus or dilute it.

Which means you shouldn't create these lists once and then put them in a drawer. These two lists are your map for each day. Review them each morning, along with your calendar, and ask: what's the plan for today? Where will I spend my time? How will it further my focus? How might I get distracted? Then find the courage to follow through, make choices, and maybe disappoint a few people.

After the CEO busted me in the elevator, he told me about the meeting he had just come from. It was a gathering of all the finalists, of which he was one, for the title of Entrepreneur of the Year. This was an important meeting for him — as it was for everyone who aspired to the title (the judges were all in attendance) — and before he entered he had made two explicit decisions: 1. To focus on the meeting itself and 2. Not to check his BlackBerry.

What amazed him was that he was *the only one* not glued to a mobile device. Were all the other CEOs not interested in the title? Were their businesses so dependent on them that they couldn't be away for one hour? Is either of those a smart thing to communicate to the judges?

There was only one thing that was most important in that hour and there was only one CEO whose behavior reflected that importance, who knew where to focus and what to ignore. Whether or not he eventually wins the title, he's already winning the game.

More on: [Managing yourself](#), [Technology](#), [Time management](#)

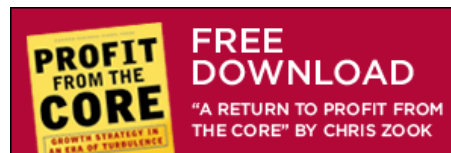
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May 27, 2009 at 11:50 AM

You are right, there are many distractions and the problem with most of us is that we lose sight of our goals.

— [RAÚL CASTELLANOS](#)

May 27, 2009 at 1:00 PM

Bravo! I just presented at a meeting yesterday where I explained the same thing - specifically in regards to managing e-mail. We cannot possibly read, scan, respond or pay attention to every email that comes through. At some point, we MUST decide to let go of 50 of the 60 e-zines, news feeds, announcements, and listserves. We must ignore the forwards and e-mails asking us to change our focus. We must decide who our 10 most important customers are. We must FOCUS on the goals and give ourselves permission to let the rest go - trusting that the information we really need will find its way to us. Very good article - Peter, your articles are quickly moving into "Top 10 Must Read" list.

— [ANGELA MATTSON](#)

May 27, 2009 at 1:53 PM

Reading your articles has definitely made it onto my focus list!

Several of the clients I coach right now are working on this very issue and I love now having words to put to what I have them do: create their Ignore List.

What most people are afraid of is that they'll miss something important if they don't pay attention to it all. What they don't realize is that they miss something important *by* paying attention to it all.

— [SABINA NAWAZ](#)

May 27, 2009 at 3:39 PM

Hi, Peter

I always enjoy reading your articles - the irony is they don't really belong on the first list! The key is deciding which distractions to allow.

— [ALAN WARD](#)

May 27, 2009 at 4:55 PM

Excellent article. That constant sense I have of "What am I missing?" which translates into "How am I at a disadvantage?" is finally put on "silent mode" by your suggestions. Attention Deficit Disorder is a clinical diagnosis for a debilitating disability, not a signal of "being in the know." Looking forward to trying your exercise over the next few days. Thanks for being so on target and nuanced in your thinking/writing.

— DAVID ROTH

May 27, 2009 at 10:27 PM

The ignore list is an interesting idea. My email set up has begun to mimic that idea - almost everything gets forwarded to folders of which there is one look at now folder, and a bunch of varying importance ranging from if time ever permits through immediate archive... I find some of the folders never get read unless the email comes up in reference to a search.

— FRED H SCHLEGEL

May 28, 2009 at 2:46 AM

Excellent article Peter. Unfortunately, as a result, I will no longer be reading your articles :) Kidding. I'd actually like to add an addition to your lists.

List 1B: Things I'll read if I can find the time.

Thanks for clearly articulating one of the most challenging work issues we're all facing today.

Steve

— STEVE CHERCHES

May 28, 2009 at 10:52 AM

You hit the nail on the head with this post, Peter. I love the idea of the two lists. So often we don't realize that when we say 'yes' to one thing, we are simultaneously saying 'no' to something else.

Kim

— KIM FREEDMAN

May 28, 2009 at 12:37 PM

Hello Peter!!

I always pleasant to totally read its articles in agreement in all the content of this, or car we checked to us, or in the end 24 hours to the day wide-awake, managing information, it will not be sufficient.

Greets from Spain.

— SANTIAGO

May 28, 2009 at 5:19 PM

I've been reading your posts off and on for a few weeks now Peter and I always seem to find a direct relationship to what I'm thinking about or working on. A few weeks ago I was inspired by your claim that "small is the new big." It kept me focused as I work to continue to develop new business for the design firm I run. Today we launched a website to connect businesses in individual buildings with each other together. The idea first came to me in our elevator so I had to smile when I read this article.

— SIDNEY BLANK

May 29, 2009 at 10:38 AM

Thanks for this. One of the first jobs that I had out of school was reading newspapers for an executive and cutting out the articles that he should read, pasting them in a notebook and handing that to him at 9AM. We all need someone like that even more now because as powerful as 2.0 technologies and search engines are, most lack that human, editorial oversight that the truly busy need applied to their information stream in order to remain strategically aware and efficient.

— LISA WELCHMAN

June 2, 2009 at 4:53 AM

Great idea BUT it doesn't really deal with the ROOT problem which caused society to lose our MINDS/ATTENTION ... hence I believe it's only a BAND-AID solution ... regards, Mark Lovekin

— MARK LOVEKIN

June 4, 2009 at 9:51 AM

Really enjoyed the article. In my coaching practice I sometimes tell a story about a job I had. I had a constant stream of paper coming across my desk. I invented a game called two piles. A do it pile and a maybe never pile. I worked on the do it pile and date stamped the maybe never pile. Once every six weeks or so I took about 30 minutes and went through the maybe never pile, if something was more than 3 months old I threw it away. I did this for nearly ten years and no one ever called me regarding something in the maybe never pile. Now I ask people to focus on priorities in a similar fashion, works about 60 to 80% of time. It's now 8:50 AM and I'm about 20 minutes past my internet surf time. Gotta go.

Any one else have some good ideas or tricks to help prioritize time?

Tom Arneson

— TOM ARNESON

June 5, 2009 at 12:04 PM

Well said (almost) but could it not have been summarised to 2 sentences to save our time. Of course you read as far as here, you may be operating from the wrong list ;)

— PAUL

June 7, 2009 at 12:19 AM

An interesting view on Managing Non Priorities. There is a guilt feeling in managing the non priorities. Guilt Management therefore becomes a Priority for our generation. Keeping oneself emotionally and sensitively live on pressing personal and official matters is a tough balancing act. But with efforts and making these two lists, it looks possible.

A template of such lists will be useful for us to devise our own list (though for some 'Go for Fishing' will find place in List One).

Has been dreaming of writing a comment eversince I started reading your articles an year ago.

Now this finds place in List one for sure.

Thanks

SK

Shidhar Khochikar
Pune, India.

— SHRIDHAR KHOCHIKAR

June 11, 2009 at 2:14 AM

Another superb piece. I liked the queries so much I actually tried to answer these in one of my blogs: <http://monwarh.wordpress.com/2009/06/11/answers-to-bregmans-questions/>.

Thanks for all the food for thought. You write very clearly and interestingly; there is a Gladweillian touch to it all, it seems. ;)

Monwar Hussain
Dhaka, Bangladesh

— MONWAR HUSSAIN

June 19, 2009 at 4:31 AM

Very nice article. So nice, actually, that i actually didnt read it completely, but rather decided to focus on those lists. :-)

— ATUL RAI

June 20, 2009 at 9:39 PM

Great thoughts !

— ANITA WEI

July 27, 2009 at 5:53 AM

it is one of the best articles i have ever read great job. the ignore list idea is the superb one. in our daily life there are people who actually start their day to plan how i will spend my day, they give

priorities to their tasks. i have'nt heard about this notion of ignore list which i think is the great one.

Farhan Wahid

— FARHAN WAHID

July 27, 2009 at 5:54 AM

Great article. It is better to focus on what we can achieve than trying to achieve everything. That is why we call multi-tasking as bad.

— PARSURAM VV

July 27, 2009 at 7:06 AM

Light and focus are important. But no-focus is important too. There are no criativity in the box. I'll never read your article, if I wasn't tweeting. Sometimes, less productivity is more intelligence.

— DAISY

July 27, 2009 at 7:40 AM

Peter, This is the first time I am reading your article. After reading this article I could not resist myself from appreciating you for this wonderful piece of information. Excellent work. Passing it on to my team.

Systems Analyst, UST Global

— VENKATESH RAMASAMY

July 27, 2009 at 8:51 AM

I would add one more thing to the article: publish your lists.

If you're actively not paying attention to something, and you publish this fact, you'll find yourself dropping off the CC of emails that you're not going to read.

Be sure to also publish the rules that will change what you're ignoring.

— ALEIDA DIKLAND

July 27, 2009 at 10:32 AM

As a Technology Consultant I struggled with too many inputs for a long time. I was exposed to Merlin Mann's Inbox Zero video and was intrigued. I followed up and read [Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity](#) and it changed my life. I have heavily modified my Outlook inbox and started using categories and an 'On Hold' list to control things that I am willing to let wait.

In my pursuit to become more efficient I have also studied [The 4-Hour Workweek](#). Tim's dialog about limiting the number of inputs is very important. I have leveraged Google's RSS reader to consolidate the things that I read into one location. I then categorize things that are Tier 1 and Tier 2 levels of importance and handle them accordingly. It has allowed me to efficiently process information and become much more efficient.

— JONATHAN GARDNER

July 27, 2009 at 10:45 AM

Very good article.

A comment on the point mentioned below:

"It's hard to do because maybe, just maybe, that next piece of information will be the key to our success."

Many people as I have seen consider "next piece of information" not just with an idea that its possibly the key to success, but also with a fear that it might have something important and missing it might hold him/her responsible for some failure.

Regards,
Krishna.

— KRISHNA SHASTRY

July 27, 2009 at 6:11 PM

Excellent article. As a business consultant, when I speak to groups or address individuals within an organization I address similar comments about staying focused, paying attention and being courteous. Well, Peter, I never thought about informing people of creating two lists! I love new ways of presenting

good business practices. Thank you!

— **MAGGIE MOWERY**

July 28, 2009 at 7:34 AM

I am thinking that I'm so distracted (especially with social media) that I'm not focusing on my actual business efforts. How many of you are the same way?

Maybe this recession would not be as deep if we just focus on the three things we need to do every day to meet our business objectives.

Between Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and email...there's little time to work on strategy. It seems I need to respond to the cast of Ben Hur first.

Thank you for the great article.

— **LOIS GELLER**

August 4, 2009 at 2:15 AM

Peter, really empowering writing.

Thanks.

— **PRIMOZ FRELIH**

August 16, 2009 at 3:33 PM

"Never before has it been so important to be grounded and intentional and to know what's important", to me that's the essence of Peter's article. It's not surprising to find an Outlook calendar being controlled by someone else - someone wants that meeting to discuss issues, to review presentations and so on. Try spending some time on a Saturday and look back at the last Monday to Friday - was time spent in talking to customers, solving business problems, providing feedback to employees or was it spent in meetings where people were anyway glued to their blackberry and in activities which would have had the same output without your presence? And talking to several colleagues reveals the same result - the value add to non-value add ratio is scary. Guess before someone else blocks away that time on Outlook, one's got to grab and protect that time and spend it on activities that are important and add value.

— **SURAJ G. JADHAV**

August 19, 2009 at 4:01 AM

Peter, You are so very right. These lists need to be part of everyday's work and I believe that though these are at the back of our minds often but still we tend to not look at them and allow the distractions to drive our day.

— **PUNEESH LAMBA**

August 28, 2009 at 4:05 PM

Interestingly, if I have not been catching up with all feeds I get, I would have missed this article :-), Anyways point well taken. A very nice writeup.

— **SATHYAN CATARI**

October 26, 2009 at 11:33 PM

Great tips for daily wins to ensure the priorities are attended and achieved without distractions. Nice guidelines.

thanks

v s kumar
INDIA

— **VSKUMAR**

October 28, 2009 at 3:13 AM

Good one. Something one can immediately apply in real life, personal or professional and begin to see results right away.

— **PARUL**

October 28, 2009 at 9:30 AM

Excellent article! Reading your article caused me to conduct a self assessment. I realize I haven't developed a laser like focus of what I will and, more importantly, will not do each day, week, month, and year. Now, my challenge is to do this and get over the feeling of I may be missing something important. Thank you for this article. I look forward to reading more in the future.

— KEITH MCINTOSH

October 29, 2009 at 3:19 AM

Absolutely right!! Mostly we all know about our focus list but we can achieve optimum result & improve focus by recognizing the ignorance list.

— NOMAN ZAFAR

November 6, 2009 at 8:11 AM

Great article - I believe focus is a new emerging critical skill set

— MARTHA WHITE

November 8, 2009 at 2:16 AM

A very pragmatic read. However, while the 1st list is easy to draw up, we often are at a loss of courage (as rightly pointed out) to draw up the second list - which is increasingly becoming more important in the recent times and age of over-information.

— AMRITA DEY

November 8, 2009 at 10:08 PM

I can't believe you people are agreeing with someone thats telling us all that we need to stop focusing on incoming information and to instead start focusing on incoming information.

Yes, I know that doesn't make much since, but neither does Mr. Peter Bregmans, "Two List" article.

Do I make since to anyone else or am I not making my point clear?

— JON BURGIN

November 16, 2009 at 4:13 PM

What a fantastic idea! I'm big on to-do lists, but I love the thought of taking a more broad approach to what *really* matters (and what doesn't) and making those major objectives my daily focus, while making a focused effort to ignore the major distractions.

I'm going to make my two lists this evening. Thanks for the inspiration!

— LAUREL MILTNER

November 17, 2009 at 12:47 AM

Nice article. I used to have severe FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and could never understand how some people could navigate their lives without knowing everything. I guess the answer is having clear priorities and goals.

— JOHN HUNT

November 19, 2009 at 9:37 AM

Hello Peter. I have been reading these blogs for quite sometime lately but just noticed today that I could actually leave my comments on the HBR site.

Maybe it is the elevator thing or just that I didn't have enough time for my thoughts to gather together coherently to patiently look through the rest of the page below the "People who read this also" box.

For me to prioritize for a work-life balance esp. when I have a new-born to learn so much from is getting to be the ONLY way to work. I am incidentally willing to disappoint my work place expectations for I won't have a new born every year to watch her grow and teach me so much about life that I have been ignorant about over the last 40 yrs.

Hope the disappointed people WILL try and understand my predicament.

— SHRIKANT

November 24, 2009 at 8:41 PM

Your articles tickles productivity. Thanks for taking us into the future. Keep thinking!

— OKEY MADUBUIKE

November 30, 2009 at 9:06 AM

Agree with the article, members of my management team suffer from not being able to shut off their Blackberry or iphone.

They often make fun of me because I am not checking my email all day but rather trying to implement structure and strategy into a company that is trying to not deflate during increased growth.

— BARBARA MANNING

November 30, 2009 at 11:30 PM

Thank you! Russians have the same problems....You should write more :) I've really enjoyed the article.

— ELENA

December 1, 2009 at 2:02 AM

Hi Peter,

Thank you for sharing such a wonderful article.

Its all about designing your life. Controlling your mind. I have learnt this from Tony Robbins Personal Power II CD.

Regards,
Fahad

— FAHAD

December 2, 2009 at 3:11 PM

Loved this article. Information overload is chipping away at effective leadership and our focus on what is most important. It is challenging not to fall into teh trap. I remember a few years back when I almost refused to accept the blackberry that came with my new promotion because I did not see the purpose of carrying another device. Ironically, I can't seem to live without it now. What has changed? I was effective before. I love the idea of the two lists, focus, and distraction free.

— JOCELYN GIANGRANDE

December 24, 2009 at 11:44 AM

This was a very useful post. Thought the case example given here is about actions taken by a CEO of what appears to be a big business, the message applies to every CEO, including the increasing number of baby boomers who are forming new businesses and becoming entrepreneurs. Your advice applies to leaders at every level of business.

Shallie Bey
Smarter Small Business Blog

— SHALLIE BEY

December 30, 2009 at 10:35 AM

I love the article. Information overload is paralyzing people to the point of ineffectiveness and even rudeness. Nothing worse than having a meeting and people concentrating more on their cell phone devices than on the actual meeting. I will share this article with everyone I know.

Thank you!

— JEAN SAWTELLE

January 3, 2010 at 11:22 AM

The trouble with leadership today is there is none. Everyone wants consensus - a formula for mediocrity. I can't believe the CEO's who get paid million then go out and hire consultants to analyze and tell them what to do. You can hire a \$150,000 a year experienced manager to do that. Everyone says we need to pay these guys to keep the talent. I say B.S. Offer the job with a good set of qualifications and I guarantee you there will be a slew of well qualified, experienced leaders who can step up to the plate. And most of them will not have the ridiculous ego issues our current "captains of industry" possess. It is time to get back to basics. Finally, I advise everyone to steer clear of repackagend and old, sometimes out dated, HB materials. I learne dmy lesst about 4 years ago.

— PETER PAGNATO

January 5, 2010 at 7:19 PM

Excellent article which the young generation must read. I have seen the young generation glued to their i pods and when coming to face to face communication becoming a failure. Expect much more from Mr Peter Bregman

— JOSE V J

January 7, 2010 at 4:50 PM

This article from last May is one of things that makes all of this networking worthwhile. As a business owner and someone who constantly likes to learn new things -- distraction is really easy for me. I have been walking into work for the past 6 months and listing out the 3 most important tasks I have in my notebook -- not on my computer. One is personal always.

— GLORIA

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