

## Let's Make an Impact

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Only a small fraction of our activities make significant improvements in our lives. Here's how to pay attention to them.

### We All Have Special Gifts

How many of you dream of doing something to make the world a bit better? Write your clues down! Discover your special gifts—the very gifts you take for granted can have impact.

- What do people keep asking you to do for them?
- What do you consistently find easy and obvious and do well that others find hard?
- What gives you energy and makes you feel deeply involved?
- What do people compliment you on?

### An Example of Making a Difference with a Special Gift

Returning to Berkeley for a PhD, I was asked to teach one of the courses required for my degree, so I needed to take another course. Since I became fascinated by an almost magic way to solve imaging problems using the powerful Fourier Theory to locate faint images, I off-handedly picked an image processing course.

Five years later, as a computer scientist at the GE Research Center, my curiosity was raised by a skunkworks project to study the new EMI brain scanner. I just wanted to know how they replaced X-ray film with computers. A skunkworks is an informal and loosely structured group, so even with limited medical and X-ray experience, I could join. The EMI brain scanner was so disappointingly slow that it could only image motionless parts of the body, like the skull. One of the engineers said he could build a much faster machine to scan the whole body, but its image was all mixed up. After no one was found to solve the problem, a colleague challenged me, saying, "Joe, with your imaging background, you are the only one here who can solve this problem." He helped me recognize my gift. Working night and day for several months, I got a solution. Unfortunately, GE wasn't willing to risk building the million-dollar prototype. But after I accurately reproduced a collection of Mayo Clinic test data, GE frantically started the project. The Research Center exploded. For several months, nothing important happened that didn't speed the development and testing of our prototype. The UC Medical School in San Francisco was so excited about the prototype that they assigned a large team of radiologists to improve it. Twenty-five years later, I hardly know a single family that hasn't benefited from our work.

Three major factors helped me and could help you: First was confidence in my special skill and willingness to work on it night and day; in retrospect, my imaging curiosity really paid off. Second was my awareness of a market need. Third was strong GE marketing support (Mayo Marketing could also give strong support to your work).

### Two Productivity Improving Tools: Triage Cards and Checklists

Even though you may doubt the value of your gifts, as practical people you can get ready by improving your productivity.

A **Triage Card** helps sort out the best thing to do every hour, just like a medical team does. It is a "to-do" list with a special format to encourage growth as well as execution.

Our dilemma is that we have both "urgent" items like talks, emergencies, or filling customers' orders AND "growth" items like learning new software, making a useful friend, getting another customer, or joining a club. These two-dimensional cards trade both of these goals against each other. Imagine four boxes arranged like this:

1 – Important & Urgent	2 – Important & Not Urgent
3 – Not Important & Urgent	4 – Not Important & Not Urgent

Horizontally we cover **urgency**: Urgent topics on the left, non-urgent ones on the right.

Vertically we cover **importance**: Important at the top, not important on the bottom.

Which should we do first? Which last?

Everyone does the 1's first, but most people then do the 3's, which isn't ideal—remember, these items are not important! Striving to do as many 2's as possible gives us time to do a better job on the growth items ahead of time and so expand our lives.

### **Basic Rules for Triage Cards**

1. Fill out a fresh one first thing in morning or last thing in the evening.
2. Use the same card to triage all day.
3. Put it away each evening.
4. On Sunday evening, lay out the week's cards and review them.

Use the 80/20 Rule to pick the key 20% most valuable activities. Decide which ones weren't worth doing. Can you drop them, or ask your supervisor to delegate them to others? Can you do the remaining ones more effectively grouped together? What new growth items would add the most to your life?

Note: The Triage Cards handed out during the session were printed to my order at Johnson Printing in Rochester.

**Checklists** are "memos to self" of important activities we often forget, like surgeons washing hands between exams. Two types cover regular events and special emergencies. Checklists are routine, not one-time like Triage Cards.

### **What Checklists Do**

- Remind experts of important items often forgotten.
- Contain "pause points" at critical moments: for example, incision, investment, and purchase.
- Urge team-building and post-mortems.
- Evolve over time. Careful testing and regular updating are vital.

Here's a successful checklist team-building story: Multiple checklists helped a new pilot–copilot–flight attendant team safely land a plane in the Hudson River and rescue all 150 passengers in just 6 minutes!

Checklistable applications in our lives include team building, investing, hiring someone, moving, coping with the death of a friend, and following an exercise program. They can help us prepare for speeches and meetings. Checklists also prove crucial in dealing with emergencies like heart attack or choking.

Tonight, I want you to pick an important topic from your list of goals and write 6-9 important action items. Be sure to test and revise your checklist.

### **Start Early to Make Your Impact—Start Right Now!**

You may be young now, but when you get older, you will ask yourself, "Did I contribute anything? Did I matter?" Truly successful people serve organizations, communities, and their families.

- Identify and develop those special skills you find so easy to take for granted.
- Concentrate on the few most important immediate tasks.
- Get an early start on a major project to maximize your impact.

### **Bibliography**

*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey, page 151.

*On-Time, On-Target Manager*, Ken Blanchard & Steve Gottry, chapter 12.

*80/20 Principle*, Richard Koch, pages 22-23.

*Checklist Manifesto*, Atul Gawande, chapter 6.