

Introduction: Organizing as a Path to Growth

Would you like to find things easily or stop running late? Do you wish it would take less effort to manage day-to-day tasks? Would you like to reduce your stress and experience your home or office as a pleasant haven? Ten years ago, as I fruitlessly tried to clean up my office yet one more time, I would have answered yes, to all of the above questions. I was looking for genuine relief from my chaos, mess, frenzy, and lateness. Now, my life is much easier because I applied some known principles of self-transformation to my chronic disorganization and I now live an easier, more creative, more connected life.

Living as a disorganized person is tough. We often pile up belongings that we don't use, spend hours looking for lost papers or other objects, pay our credit card bills late and lose our credit ratings. We make our homes and workplaces uncomfortable and unattractive. We take on too much, overbook ourselves, can't keep appointments or get to them on time, and miss important events. Disorder can be a nightmare, and those who suffer from it often feel locked in, unable to escape.

We suffer because we betray deeply held values such as integrity, dignity, and responsibility. Disorganization damages reputations, self-confidence, and relationships. Even though we can get a lot done and are often very successful, we are often haunted by the sense that we could do or be more if we weren't looking for things so often, or experiencing so much pressure. We get in our own way. Those of us who are disorganized often feel tremendous shame about the way we are living. So, in addition to everything else, we have to hide the disorganization (as much as we can).

Most disorganized people truly want to live without the chaos. They want to arrive at appointments on time. They want a sense of calm that is difficult to find in a swamp of disorder. There are plenty of books and

classes about how to create order in one's life, but the advice doesn't take into account the depth and meaning of being disorganized. Transforming chaos into order—getting organized—is often described as a series of action steps fueled by will. The message is: Don't do X; just do Y. This book is different. I help you understand *why* you are disorganized, and I'll give you a clear method to follow to help you change your ways over time. Not only will you learn how to get organized, but you also will acquire new skills, work through emotional wounds, develop more powerful ways of thinking, and deepen your connection to life energy. Clearing up your external messes can lead you to a path to deeper self-knowledge and a sense of inner peace and order.

By profession, I am an organizational development consultant. My job is to help people in organizations work together better. I enable people to build stronger teams, communicate well, and develop effective organizational strategies. I am interested in change at all levels. I use a multiplicity of theories, approaches, and tools to support people to live more fulfilling lives.

It took me years to apply my professional knowledge about change to my own crushing habits of disorganization. I had an aversion to organizing. I thought I would become rigid and compulsive, that I would have to give up my creativity and self-expression. Yet, as I took on more responsibility, raised my sights and saw more possibilities for myself, I kept stumbling. I ran late, missed appointments, forgot to return important phone calls, couldn't find vital documents, misplaced airline tickets, lost receipts, and became overwhelmed by my long to-do list. It was an impossible way to live.

I read many organizing books and tried to "fix" my problem. But I couldn't do it. Much as I tried, I couldn't make the changes in my life that I wanted to. I discovered that I was up against something that was harder and more complex than I realized. I was going to have to draw on all of my expertise to accomplish my goals.

The first step was to take my disorganization much more seriously. I needed to stop thinking that I could "solve" my problem. I abandoned quick fixes and became much more interested in the complexity of my challenge. I brought respect and compassion to my messy ways instead of disdain and impatience. I studied how I was creating my mess. As I

became more responsible about the unwanted consequences I was creating, I changed the behaviors that led to those consequences.

As I became more organized, I faced a number of paradoxes. Contrary to my previous belief, I became more, not less, creative. That was a big surprise. I freed up time and attention to be even more expressive and more creative. I experienced an emotional aliveness that wasn't possible for me when I was in a frenzy so much of the time. I discovered that busyness and frenzy are different from emotional fullness. And I discovered that I was often well repaid for the "wasted" time I invested in getting organized. I got time and energy back in spades.

In some ways, the path of organizing is an inquiry into how to live well and fulfill your potential. Perhaps the most surprising benefit is that by getting organized, you can learn valuable lessons that foster growth and character development. You'll start to see that organizing is a way to express self-love and self-care. Organizing is also a way to take on responsibility. You will discover that beliefs such as "I have too much to do to get organized" or "Organizing is a waste of time" don't support you anymore. You will learn that you can manage your own tendencies to be distracted easily or forget what you meant to be doing. You'll balance the time you spend in a "flow" state, in which you are deeply engaged with what you truly love, with creating the conditions for this flow state to take place. Living well is ultimately about loving yourself and others, connecting with what really matters to you, and taking actions based on what you truly care about. Being organized actually can improve your chances of doing so.

This approach is founded on the premise that it is the whole person who creates disorder, and therefore it is the whole person who must create a new, meaningful way of living. It shows you a path for change, identifies many crossroads along the way, and points out where and how you can choose to modify your behavior. It enables you to reframe organizing from an unpleasant *should* into a vital and exciting part of your quest for growth and learning.

This book is for you if you want to experience more clarity and freedom in daily life. It's for you if you can no longer bear the stress of running late or losing things; if you have been longing for sanity and

simplicity, but have been unable to make it happen; if you have realized that you can't move forward in your work because you are hampered by your clutter and lateness; or if you have been meditating for years, and still live surrounded by clutter. It's for those of you who have attention deficit disorder and who want a sympathetic guidebook on how to manage distractibility.

This book is for those of us who are suffering and know it. We are painfully aware that disorganization:

- Blocks our true self-expression because we are mired in details, can't find things, or can't get comfortable.
- Reinforces our distractibility, which in turn reduces our creativity or effectiveness.
- Fosters an ugly, unpleasant environment that impacts our sense of well-being.
- Causes stress and worry, which is exhausting and drains our vitality over time.
- Causes us to feel stuck, depressed, or ineffective, which can lead to a deep depletion of spirit.
- Leads us to break agreements, offer more than we can give, and then let others and ourselves down.

Being disorganized often feels like a permanent state—and yet it does not have to be. Healing is possible. Deep personal change can come from addressing disorganization in your life. Join me and others who have pursued this path of learning and reaped great benefit from changing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It takes courage and receptivity to move from self-blame and impatience to inquiry and learning, but it is worth the effort. You'll start feeling more self-confidence, more energy, and more joy in just living. Welcome!



Organizing Your Organization

If you work with other people, in a small company or large, you are probably affected by disorganization at work. We've already addressed ways for you to deal with your own individual organizing issues, which you can apply to your work. Now it is time to examine the larger issue of how teams and companies as a whole often allow disorganization to creep in and disrupt both productivity and worker morale. "Organizations" are often anything but what the word implies!

Whether you are in top management or on the front lines, share these ideas with your colleagues and see if others would be willing to join with you to implement some of these suggestions, many of which you can put to use right away.

Organizations Out of Control

What does a disorganized workplace look and feel like? Let's listen to what people in such organizations have to say.

"We are overwhelmed and exhausted. We push hard to get through one project, and then there's another one that we have to do," says a manager of a large social service organization.

"We race to get products out the door, but often we find major errors,

since we have been pushing so hard and everyone is tired. Then there is the major push to rectify the error, plus the yelling and blaming and trying to figure who did the bad deed,” says the operations manager of a manufacturing plant.

“We e-mail everyone to keep them informed; then nobody has time to read their e-mails. A typical day leaves me with two hundred e-mail messages in my in-box,” says a marketing director of a major pharmaceutical company.

“I can’t trust anyone here to do what they said they were going to do. I like them, and we are all friendly, but I can’t count on anyone. If you want to get anything done around here, you have to do it yourself,” says a foundation director.

“This place is a mess. People leave dirty coffee cups in the kitchen, there are dead plants in the window, and someone left a bunch of boxes in the closet. We can’t agree on how to keep this place looking nice,” says the associate director of a grassroots organization.

“I don’t have one moment during the day to stop and reflect on what we are doing or why we are doing it,” says a management consultant.

“People end up in each other’s offices with closed doors, telling each other how they can’t work with someone else,” says the nursing director of a retirement home.

One of the major challenges of getting organized at work is that people tend to experience workplace chaos as individuals, even though disorganization is generated collectively. A group gets disorganized when people can’t agree on what they want to do together, so everyone ends up doing their own thing. The team or work group loses track of what is important: it starts running late, losing valuable information; and members begin to break agreements, not only with each other but also with clients, patients, funders, or others outside the group.

Disorganization takes place when it’s not clear who is accountable for managing important tasks. It is a collective experience of being unable to work well together; a collective experience of things falling through the cracks, of missed opportunities, of losing track of priorities, of not knowing who is supposed to do what.

Even in teams of a few people, disorganization can grow exponentially as members inadvertently behave in ways that cause each other to be disorganized. Kim’s late arrival to a meeting means that David and

Karen arrive late to their following meeting. Robert's inability to find something important leads to Richard's and Lisa's inability to meet an important deadline. We are interconnected in workplaces and our habits affect each other.

Disorganization increases when fellow employees don't address their frustrations directly with each other. Let's say someone performs poorly on a task or breaks a promise to a colleague. Will anyone tell him directly and kindly that he isn't doing well? Unfortunately, colleagues will rarely let others know that a breakdown has occurred. Often other people know far more about how we are doing than we do, but they won't tell us, because they don't want to be unkind. Then we are often in the dark about how we are doing and we can't improve. Our methods for learning from experiences together are often very limited. Much too often, people are blamed by others for doing a poor job, yet no one will give them the information they need to change. Does this sound familiar? Does this make a mess at work? You bet.

People tend to spend a lot of time complaining about each other's disorganization without effectively addressing the issues at hand. Although those complaints temporarily relieve the pain of missed deadlines and broken agreements, they actually make things worse by reducing trust. In these organizations, people know about the complaining behind each others' backs, and most people participate in the gossip, even though they know that others may be talking behind their backs as well. Without direct feedback, however, they can't improve their behavior. The challenge is to have conversations that help relieve the problems over the long run, rather than simply complaining in the halls, which only relieves the pain temporarily.

These are all symptoms of disorganization at work. These workplaces are difficult to work in and very hard to change. Just as disorganization can become a stumbling block for an individual, it can become a stumbling block for an organization, making difficult work situations even more stressful and frustrating. Just as disorganization can block your personal energy, leaving you drained and frantic, it can block an organization's energy, leaving people dispirited, cynical, and burned out. The pain is experienced one by one, but the cure is in working better together as a group.

Great Things Are Possible at Work

Well-organized workplaces are much more than environments where people return phone calls on time, accomplish their projects, water the plants, stay on top of their work, and clean out the coffee cups regularly. Healthy, well-run organizations foster a greater connection with others, a sense of camaraderie, and an experience of working together for a common purpose. We can bring our best selves to the workplace, gain energy from our work and colleagues, as well as find ways of working together that connect us soul-to-soul and heart-to-heart.

In this sense, being well organized does not mean running like clock-work; rather, it means creating a workplace that helps people:

- **Focus** on what is important both to themselves and to the organization.
- **Take action** to achieve their vision and seize new opportunities as they arise.
- **Complete tasks** in a timely way.
- **Keep track** of important information and be able to lay their hands on it when they want to.
- **Conduct productive, stimulating meetings** that help to clarify and monitor vision, goals, roles, decisions, difficulties, and action steps.
- **Make and keep agreements** that enable each other to get work done effectively.
- **Hold each other accountable** for agreements in a way that the group learns from both successes and failures.
- Do all of the above with a large degree of **presence of mind**. People are able to pay attention to what they decide is important while demonstrating respect and care for one another.

How is it possible to get beyond the frustrations of disorganization and establish a healthy, well-organized, meaningful workplace? You can help create that change by instituting these five powerful work processes:

1. Share vision and coordinate goals so that everyone knows where they are going and if they are on track.

2. Clarify roles so that people know who is doing what and why.
3. Move from blame to accountability in ways that promote learning. Everyone stops looking for the culprit and examines how their systems may make it hard to do work well.
4. Conduct effective meetings to help people get their work done together better.
5. Store and retrieve information in ways that genuinely support the people's work together.

Let's look at each of these issues in turn—why they are important, and what specific tools you can use to achieve them at your workplace.

