

dear residents

Quadrants, Checklists, and the Art of Doing

June 22, 2025

Dear Residents,

This weekend marks the **summer solstice**, with sunrise at 6:19 AM and sunset at 8:38 PM, resulting in a whopping 14 hours and 19 minutes of daylight. I've started working on Parkland wards, and it's a delightful respite from my daily administrative tasks. What I find most satisfying about attending on the wards is the predictable pattern of work: long calls, short calls, and no-admission days. The work flows smoothly, gets completed, and moves on. However, this isn't the case for other aspects of my job. Tasks pile up, unexpected issues arise, deadlines fluctuate, and task complexity often remains unpredictable. Then, someone comes up with a "new and efficient" process (which might be efficient for them, of course!).

Program Director, or PD, is a job title that sometimes feels **like Productivity Director**. I've tried to manage my productivity and improve my efficiency, but I'm naturally a dreamer. When I'm anxious about something, I often get it done quickly, but other things aren't as easy for me to complete efficiently. I've tried many productivity hacks, but none of them have fully worked for me. However, I've learned a few tricks along the way.

I initially embraced the **concept of the four quadrants** proposed by Steven Covey, with the intention of prioritizing quadrant 2. I was fully aware of the significant time consumed by quadrant 1 and the allure of quadrant 4. Much later, I recognized the importance of quadrant 4 for rest and recovery. As my understanding of mindfulness grew, I realized that excessive productivity could actually lead to a decrease in productivity. Consequently, quadrant 4 became quite indispensable. I believe this is what Covey missed – the relentless drive for productivity is unforgiving. So, forgive yourself for indulging in binge-watching your favorite series - it's okay to waste a little time.

Residency Program Director Prioritization Matrix

	 URGENT	 NOT URGENT
 IMPORTANT	Q1: Immediate Action • Clinical coverage crises • Last-minute schedule changes • ACGME citations • Trainee in distress	Q2: Long-Term Impact • Curriculum development • Faculty development • Strategic partnerships • Resident mentorship
 NOT IMPORTANT	Q3: Distractions • Non-critical emails • Unplanned or non-strategic meetings • External requests not aligned with core goals	Q4: Time Wasters • Overchecking inbox • Redundant paperwork • Tasks better suited for delegation

For email management, I employ the four-D method: Do it if it's a quick task, Delete it if it's trivial, Delegate it if it requires someone else's attention, or Defer it if it demands thoughtful consideration and time. However, the challenge arises when my deferred items accumulate to over 100, prompting a second round of the four-D process. (Of note, I permanently deleted my social media accounts last year and haven't really missed them).

Sometimes, I find myself stuck at the beginning of a task, hindered by a few invisible steps that prevent me from even taking the first step. For instance, someone asked me to help schedule a pediatric cardiology visit for their 16-year-old daughter, who had been diagnosed with a murmur. I've been meaning to do it, but I ended up not doing it right away. The reason behind this is that I needed to determine the next actionable step. It took me some time to recognize that this was the block in my path of task completion. I needed to first figure out if 16 is old enough for an adult cardiologist. If so, I knew plenty of them. If not, I needed to identify who to reach out to. I agreed to help because it was a friend, and I wanted to be helpful. Next time you find yourself not being able to start something – break down the steps and determine the next actionable step.

I've read Gawande's Checklist Manifesto and Daniel Levitin's Organized Mind, both of which suggest that holding To Do items in your head is unreliable and cognitively wasteful. While I do make lists, when they become too long, I create two lists and limit myself to feeding 10 items at a time from the big list to the smaller list. This approach helps me keep the task list psychologically manageable. I also enjoy reading Oliver Burkeman's books and blog – he is a self-titled Imperfectionist and makes the case that productivity is overrated.

When I wake up, I check my emails and complete the four D's. I also try to solve Wordle and Connections (quadrant 4!). I start my workday with the most challenging and time-consuming task first. By getting it out of the way, I pave the way for a smoother day ahead.

I look forward to working with Team B for the next 2 weeks.

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