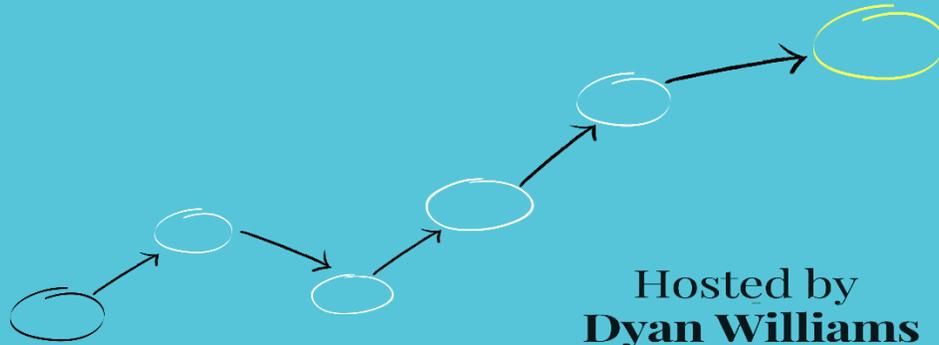


THE INCREMENTALIST

A **PRODUCTIVITY PODCAST** ON
MAKING BIG CHANGES IN SMALL STEPS



EPISODE 22

Effortless Productivity

<http://www.dyanwilliams.com/effortless-productivity/>

Do you believe your high goals have to be hard to accomplish?

Is it bad to seek out an easier path to get the desired results?

Does life have to be challenging and complicated?

After you've chosen the essentials, do you still feel overwhelmed?

This is Episode 22. Effortless Productivity.

Hello and welcome to The Incrementalist, a productivity podcast on making big changes in small steps. My name is Dyan Williams and I'm your productivity coach and host for this show.

It's common to believe that any problem can be solved with hard, heads-down work. While diligence and determination are elements of success, you could also seek to make essential tasks easier to do.

We tend to think that important and valuable work has to be hard. This could be writing a book, leading a team, designing a new product, running a business, or preparing a presentation. But too much effort is counterproductive when it leads to chronic stress, health problems, sleep issues, and burnout.

You first need to decide where to focus your energy. Once you determine the essentials, how do you make them as easy as possible to do?

Work can be effortless if you break it down into small, easy to manage chunks. It can also feel effortless if you pair it with a fun activity.

In his latest book *Effortless*, Greg McKeown reminds us to take the path of least resistance and to make hard work easier. He's the best-selling author of the earlier book *Essentialism*, which teaches us to distinguish the trivial many from the vital few. McKeown defines *Essentialism* as "a systematic discipline for discerning what is absolutely essential, then eliminating everything that is not, so we can make the highest possible contribution toward the things that really matter."

The book sequel *Effortless* might not be as influential as the first book. But it provides several nuggets on how to get maximum results in an effortless state with effortless action.

This approach has its limitations because it doesn't apply in every situation. It's not always true that you have not looked for an easier path or that the answer lies in finding an easier path. You often have to put in lot of effort, at least at the start, for a worthwhile thing to later feel effortless. But it is true that we sometimes make things harder and more complicated than they need to be.

McKeown says puritan ideas lead us to assume that hard things have value and easy things do not. He says this is a limiting perspective. We distrust the smart, efficient and effortless path to accomplishment or achievement.

More work and harder work can be exhausting. To make sustainable progress toward the best outcomes, you embrace three big ideas:

Think: the most essential things can be the easiest to do.

Do: find the easier path

Get: the right results without burning out

There's the Effortless State, Effortless Action and Effortless Results.

Let's go deeper into Big Idea #1, Effortless State

McKeown writes "The Effortless State is an experience many of us have had when we are physically rested, emotionally unburdened, and mentally energized. You are completely aware, alert, present, attentive, and focused on what's important in this moment. You are able to focus on what matters most with ease."

This is basically the state of flow, a concept that was named by Hungarian-American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is a highly focused mental state in which you are highly involved in the activity and enjoy doing it for its own sake.

When you enjoy a task that capitalizes on your strengths and matches your interests, you are more productive. You get into the zone. You move into an effortless state.

How can you make this task easy? How can you make it easier to focus?

Here are five ways:

INVERT – Invert the question from "Why is this so hard?" to "What if this could be easy?" The right or best way is not always the hardest path. If you're feeling overwhelmed, consider how you might be making things harder than they need to be. Are there ways you could make them simpler and perhaps effortless?

ENJOY – Ask, how can you make this fun? Work and play don't always have to be separate. You could pair a tedious task with a fun activity. Clean up your office while you listen to music, work out on the treadmill while you watch a movie, review a financial report while you sit by the lake, listen to your favorite podcast while you make dinner. Create opportunities to learn and have fun while you do tasks and chores that you find tedious or boring.

You could also get better tools and design your ideal workspace. For example, office upgrades like an ergonomic chair and wireless mouse, a mechanical keyboard, and a desk lamp with a timer and different brightness levels make it more fun for me to work at my desk. Sometimes I will have brain.fm or instrumental music like the Monumental Valley soundtrack on while I do deep work or boring tasks.

Habits and routines can also be turned into meaningful rituals. While a habit is something you do automatically, a ritual is something you do with deliberate intention and focus. There is deeper awareness of the action and more soul behind it.

When you incorporate building blocks of joy into your daily work, you are better able to sustain the progress over the long haul. Goals always bring gaps because once you hit the goal, there's another to meet. The goal of launching this podcast was met with the release of my first episode. But having it as a passion project is what helps to keep it going with new episodes. I would feel burned out if I didn't enjoy talking about the topics that cover on The Incrementalist.

RELEASE – Let go of limiting beliefs, untested assumptions, and negative thoughts. Mental clutter can hold you back from reaching an effortless state, which stops you from taking effortless action and getting effortless results.

Let go of anger and resentment you have about others and what they've done or haven't done. When you hold on to grudges, you drain your mental bandwidth and emotional energy. This doesn't mean you let toxic people back into your life. You can wish people well and wish them no ill will even if you don't maintain ties with them.

Each time you complain, next say what you're grateful for or proud of. When you complain, you focus on what you lack, you dwell on what's wrong, what's difficult, your worries and your regrets. When you shift to gratitude, you get what you lack. You consider the resources, knowledge, skills, team, assets and support you have. Gratitude is a powerful way to get into an effortless state.

REST – Practice the art of doing nothing. Slow down your pace to make steady progress toward completion. To synch with your ultradian rhythm, take a real break for 20 minutes after every 90 minutes of work, for instance. Experiment and track your habits to learn what works best for you. McKeown writes, "Do not do more today than you can completely recover from by tomorrow." Don't do more in a week that you can't recover from in a week.

Relax on purpose. Maybe the task isn't really creating momentum; you're just spinning your wheels and moving fast, without gaining traction.

If your action seems too forced, like you're trying too hard, move the project to the backburner when possible. When the time is right, you can get back to it. If I find myself writing a memo or outlining a podcast episode, and the words are not flowing, I will take a break from it. Maybe I will put it off and choose another topic that feels more effortless.

NOTICE – minimize distractions and interruptions and be fully present so you can see clearly. Clean up your physical environment and declutter your mind. Engage in mindfulness, take a break from the news, and find and keep a hobby you love. Listen to Episode 21 for more on why hobbies make you more productive and creative.

Let's move on to Big Idea #2, Effortless Action

McKeown says "Effortless Action means accomplishing more by trying less. You stop procrastinating and take the first obvious step. You arrive at the point of completion

without overthinking. You make progress by pacing yourself rather than powering through. You overachieve without overexerting.” –

What small step do you need to do next?

Here are five ways to make the next step effortless:

DEFINE – First define what “done” looks like. Set the criteria, the conditions and the standards for what it means to be finished, to have a minimum, viable work product. Take 60 seconds to visualize the desired outcome that will permit you to stop when you get there.

Have a “Done for the Day” list that tells you when you have made meaningful progress. You call it a day when you’ve completed these essential things – the rest can be put off for another day. It could be one thing, or three main things, and not more than 5 or 6. Test and track to see what your own max is.

If you’re a perfectionist, shoot for 80% done in the execution. This will help avoid overthinking, overdesigning, and overtweaking.

After hitting the peak point of productivity, every unit of effort starts to bring diminishing returns or negative returns. Your marginal output drops or you make the results worse as you do more work.

Don’t let your identity, ego, persona, and perfectionist tendencies get in the way of effortless action. Yes, if you’re writing a report, memo or article, you want to avoid typos and grammatical errors. But every sentence doesn’t have to be unique, phrased perfectly or have a big impact.

Have an upper limit, not just a lower limit. If you plan to write a minimum of 100 words a day, maybe you also plan to not go over 1000 words a day. If you set a minimum of 2 pages for a report, set a maximum too, like no more than 10 pages.

Have a specific end goal and end point to bring clarity for effortless action.

START - Make the first action obvious to do. If you’re feeling stuck, take 2.5 seconds to decide what to do now. Start with a ten-minute microburst of focused activity to boost your energy and trigger action.

If you have a writing project that’s due next week, start with writing the first sentence. Then move to the next and the next until you have your minimum of 100 words or 500 words for the day. Momentum will kick in until you have the required 1000 words. If you need to declutter your office, or clean out your garage, just start with the first obvious action.

In my book *The Incrementalist*, I write that Principle #2 for creating big results in small steps is to break your projects into small action steps. Distinguish between a project and a task. Begin with super small actions that you can expand upon instead of going for bold actions at the outset.

Take the first obvious step to get maximum learning and optimal results from minimal viable effort.

SIMPLIFY - To simplify the process, start from zero. Don't just simplify the steps, but also remove the non-essential steps. What may you not do? Subtract as much as possible.

Think about the minimum number of steps to complete a project well. Combine steps or delete unnecessary actions. Instead of following a recipe exactly as written, maybe Swap the ingredients to what's in your pantry or modify the steps to fit your skill level, time limits and degree of patience.

McKeown tells the story about the head of media at a university who was asked by a professor to record his lectures and courses. She immediately thought about multimedia, multicamera, high-end production, which would be a big assignment for her team. She then asked the professor to clarify the reason for the recordings – was it to repurpose and reuse the lectures? It turns out they were for a single student-athlete who would be missing the lectures due to sports events. They decided that all they had to do was to have a willing student record the lecture with the camera on his phone.

Simplify especially well when the task is not your main job or your top priority. Maybe you're just doing it as a favor or the outcome doesn't require high standards.

PROGRESS – Be willing to start with rubbish to kick off a project. Learn cheaply and adapt quickly. Aim for consistent progress, not perfection. Perfectionism makes it hard to start; self-doubt makes it hard to finish; and trying to do too many things at once makes it hard to gain momentum.

PACE – A sustainable and effortless pace will carry you through in long-term projects. Big sprints and powering through will leave you exhausted and burned out. Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.

In December 1911, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen and his team completed the first expedition to reach the South Pole. Robert Falcon Scott and his British team started out at the same time and from the same distance. They arrived about 30 days later.

The Norwegian team went with a slower and gradual pace. They did 15 miles maximum every day, whether there was good weather or bad weather. Eventually, they could see the South Pole from a distance. They knew that if they pushed on to their limits, they would reach the South Pole in one day. Instead, they continued with the 15-mile maximum and got there three days later. They also made it back home safely.

Meanwhile, the British team pushed to the maximum on good weather days and rested on bad weather days. Although they made it to the South Pole, it was 5 weeks

later than the other team. They were exhausted and demoralized. On their way back home, they all suffered from frostbite and died.

While your work might not be as risky, you still need to keep a consistent pace daily to avoid exhausting yourself with hard sprints.

If you look for an easier way, it doesn't mean you're lazy, less committed or dedicated. You're just setting yourself up for a more sustainable pace that leads to big results.

Let's wrap up with Big Idea #3, Effortless Results.

McKeown describes Effortless Results as follows: "You've continued to cultivate your Effortless State. You've started to take Effortless Action with clarity of objective, tiny, obvious first steps, and a consistent pace. You are achieving the results you want, more easily. But now you want those results to continue to flow to you, again and again, with as little additional effort as possible. You are ready to achieve Effortless Results."

Effortless results require the ability to achieve repeatable success through systems. You're getting the highest return with the least effort.

This doesn't mean you cheat or plagiarize. I've experienced one lawyer replicating one of my YouTube videos word-for-word, and she only dropped the last few minutes. There's copyright protection with videos but not so much with blogging. I've had other lawyers plagiarize or copy my blog posts with no citation or credit. All they did was change the introduction or the last paragraph or the title. Let's not aim for this kind of effortless.

To get Effortless Results, you do the following:

LEARN – Learn first principles and how they connect with each other, not just the facts and the methods. When you understand the main principles, you can apply them to different areas of your life. Leverage the best of what others already know and build your own unique knowledge base to navigate your own life.

LIFT – Teach others what you have learned. Teaching is a lever to harness the strength of ten. Notice what you learn and apply what you learn. When you teach, you speed up your learning. You pay it forward and gain by helping others achieve their results.

AUTOMATE - Make time by automating as many essential tasks as possible. Your brain likes checklists, cheat sheets and templates. Pilots, surgeons and lawyers, for example, benefit a lot from this type of automation.

Get it right and make good choices the first time so you don't have to correct your mistakes and do the task all over again. Put in the effort at the outset so you can repurpose and reuse the process.

You can't automate everything. I prepare new notes and make a new recording with each new episode of this podcast. But there are high-tech tools for post-production and uploading the audio file for release.

TRUST – Build trust in your relationships. Trust is the engine oil for frictionless and high-functioning teams. When hiring, look for the three I's: integrity, intelligence, and initiative. Things get easier when you hire someone you trust. Get clear on the results you seek, the roles and responsibilities of each team member, the rules that apply, the resources that are available, and the rewards for success.

PREVENT - Solve the problem before it happens; don't just manage it. Frame problems correctly, look for early warning signs, and course correct before complications accrue. Sometimes it's not about becoming better problem solvers, but about preventing the problem in the first place.

In the conclusion of *Effortless*, McKeown writes that what happens next is what matters most. He describes a health scare with his daughter Eve, when she turned 14. She is getting better but the recovery is ongoing. McKeown says near-superhuman effort to deal with the situation was unsustainable. He and his wife decided to take another path, which was to make every day a little easier.

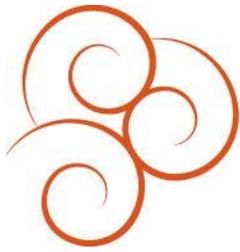
He says, whatever has happened to you in life, whatever hardship, whatever pain, they pale in comparison to the power you have to choose what to do now. Instead of working harder and harder, and exhausting and burning yourself out, you can choose a more effortless path.

In life, some worthwhile things are actually hard to do and require a lot of effort. Some difficult things are worth doing and are rewarding to do. Some challenging tasks cannot be delayed, delegated or deleted and must be done now by you. But not everything that's worthwhile has to be hard. You have permission to choose the easier path and to make essential activities as easy as possible.

If you found this episode helpful, share it with someone who could benefit from fewer difficulties and complications. Subscribe to the show and give it a 5-star rating and review if you want it to continue. You may also contact me through my website at dyanwilliams.com if you have topic ideas or book recommendations.

The *Incrementalist* ebook is on sale for \$4.99, until June 20. After that the regular minimum price of \$9.99 will apply. You can find it at leanpub.com/incrementalist. The link is in the show notes.

Thank you for your positive energy and effortless presence. Join me again for the next episode of *The Incrementalist* podcast.



DYAN WILLIAMS

Empowering Insights for Life, Work and Business