

Essentialism Do Less Better

Idea In Short

Choose fewer things, but do them better. In a world where generative AI makes everything easier, the scarce resource is disciplined choice. Say no to nonessential commitments, identify your unfair advantage and reinvest reclaimed time into what compounds.

The Scarcity of Disciplined Choice

In a world where generative AI makes everything easier, the scarce resource is disciplined choice. Essentialism, written by Greg McKeown, is a strategic book that asks the big questions we should be asking ourselves. What does winning mean to you? What should you do less of? What is keeping you from your maximum contribution? 1

The book rejects the lie that overachievers tell themselves. We believe we should do more, sleep less, optimize everything and exceed expectations all the time, everywhere. That sounds impossibly tiring. McKeown argues the opposite path leads to greater impact and fulfillment.

Living by Design, Not by Default

You can be the owner and architect of your own life. If you are reading this, you have played the game well. You are educated, ambitious and resourceful. You have a network of people who love you and enough relational equity to tell you when you are wrong. You have earned the right to make choices about what you focus on, who you work with, what you prioritize and what life you live daily.

Increasingly, we do not have to do much. The real question is what you choose to do. Madeleine L'Engle observed that the ability to choose is what makes us human. This freedom carries responsibility. Defaulting into commitments is the opposite of living by design.

The 80/20 Principle and Practically Everything

As consultants, we continually focus on the 20 percent of inputs driving 80 percent of outputs. We identify key drivers and decide where to focus attention. We are paid to solve expensive problems, so we attack the core of the disease rather than fooling around with symptoms. 2

McKeown has a chapter entitled The Unimportance of Practically Everything. He argues that 98 percent or more of news, articles and gossip have no impact on your life. Caution is warranted because generative AI helps you do the trivial stuff faster, and that can be a trap. The metaphor is that generative AI is a power tool. You can cut faster, but are you building the right stuff?

Trade-Offs Are Inevitable

In strategy, the principle holds that strategy equals what you decide not to do. Too often, companies, universities and nonprofits try to be all things to all people, and they fail. Opportunity costs exist with money, time and attention. Everything you commit to costs you something else you could be doing.

Consider a survey result from an organization declaring something important without revealing the opportunity costs. How much would it cost, whether \$1 million or \$100 million? If you did not do it, where could you invest the money instead? Nothing is free. Michael Porter argued that strategy is about making choices and trade-offs, deliberately choosing to be different.

The Need to Explore

Overachievers are eager to do great work, add value, beat their key performance indicators and win awards. The question is what you are trying to grind for. Naval Ravikant warns against playing silly games for silly prizes. Have you spent as much time on career strategy as on vacation planning?

McKeown extols the need for escape, observation, play and sleep. You need enough margin to grok something, see adjacencies, connect dots and invent. You cannot be creative on command. Exploration requires space and breathing room. 3

An executive coach helps clients see themselves, acting as a mirror for self-observation, reflection and action. You can practice this for 30 minutes. Ask an AI tool to act as an executive coach and pose questions. Reflect on three things you do particularly well. Identify three problems that need fixing. Interview three people you respect. Imagine your income is guaranteed and ask what you would master. Consider what gap generative AI will not fill over five years.

Wasting Time Is Not Unselfishness

People are generally bad at saying no. Without strong opinions, we default into meetings that do not matter and parties we do not want to attend. If you do not want to go, why are you going? The common reason is fear of appearing selfish or hurting feelings.

You can make it up to people in many ways. Proofread their resume as a service. Send them an analyst report. Buy a gift. Thank them earnestly in front of their boss. There are many ways to be a relationship builder, friend, ally and mensch without attending every event.

Hell Yeah or No

Derek Sivers wrote a book called Hell Yeah or No, and the heuristic is simple and dramatic. When you are unsure, building an overly detailed pro-and-con list or feeling wishy-washy, ask whether the opportunity gets you excited. If it is a hell yeah, do it now because it will matter and make a good story. If not, the answer is no.

Josh Billings noted that half the troubles of life trace to saying yes too quickly and not saying no soon enough. This filter prevents the slow accumulation of obligations that crowd out essential work.

Eliminate the Nonessential

Eliminating means saying no to activities, people, appointments, rituals and items on your calendar. In the short term, this feels uncomfortable because of embarrassment, shame, guilt and fear. We all want to fit in, and saying no might feel selfish or self-indulgent.

Strategy is about a set of activities, not just words or vision statements. It is rooted in the competitive environment of reality, money, time and relationships. The goal is to define what

winning means to you and then win. This takes time and toil.

If you have big hopes, you are talking about 10,000 hours of mastery, craftsmanship, quiet work, writing, thinking and learning. You need time. Find ways to stop doing secondary things so you can focus on the essential, then double down on it.

Be Picky With Your Time

You are an expensive person. If we live to 90, we get roughly 32,000 days. How will you spend this one? What is super valuable and what comes first? What parts of your work will decline because of generative AI over five years? What crucial conversation should you have now to align with your values?

The elimination process requires honesty. What boundaries need reinforcing? What activities, people and obligations drain you, and can you find other solutions? What is the first domino that creates a cascade of good things?

The Ongoing Practice

Wisdom is taking your own advice. The struggle is daily, and writing about it is part of eating your own dog food. Recent wins include saying no to a speaking engagement that was not a great fit. They include tracking sleep and winding down earlier. They include reworking teaching content for reuse next year.

Recent failures exist too. Worrying for hours about a project is procrastination, not productivity. Not calling a friend for two weeks reflects pride rather than logic. Doing a favor that was not a hell yeah cost three hours of unpleasantness. The practice is imperfect but necessary.

Reflect and act. What can you say no to that will save 10 hours and cost almost nothing relationally or financially? Reinvest that time into your unfair advantage, something uniquely yours that builds for your future. Is it a hell yeah, or a no?

- 1Harvard Business Review on the disciplined pursuit of less
- 2BiggerPockets on the 80/20 principle
- 3Harvard Business Review on doing things better by stopping doing so much

Summary

Essentialism is not about doing less for its own sake. It is about doing the right things with full commitment. Say no to the trivial, protect your time and reinvest it into your unfair advantage. In a world of abundance, disciplined choice is the ultimate competitive edge.