

Leave The Juggling To The Clowns

I searched YouTube this morning for “juggling” videos, and my search yielded 122,000,000+ results. No surprise, because we all do a lot of juggling, don’t we? How many balls do you have in the air right now?

More importantly, what tends to happen when you have even one too many balls in the air? They all come crashing down!

Balls On The Ground

It’s time to lose the juggling analogy. It’s a poor – and highly stressful! – way to manage time. Instead, let’s start a new practice of rolling balls on the ground instead of juggling them in the air.

This takes some visualization, so let’s start by imagining a flat stretch of lawn, with a starting line, a finish line, and a “holding pen.” Now let’s add some balls to the lawn, one to represent each task on your plate today.

Now comes the important part. Take a moment to consider each task, and arrange the balls in priority order, highest to lowest, parallel to the starting line. For any task not yet started, the balls stays right on the starting line. For any task in progress – maybe something you started earlier in the week but didn’t complete – move it an appropriate distance closer to the finish line. Now, starting with your highest priority task, what would be an acceptable outcome for today? Is this a task that must be completed today? Would it be enough to move the ball forward by some distance? Is moving the ball forward some distance the best that you can do today, considering everything else that’s on your plate?

Here are some words of wisdom: *Progress* is almost always an acceptable outcome. Yes, just about every task has an ultimate deadline, but you’ll probably do yourself more good by keeping more tasks moving forward according to a plan than by trying to juggle every task that comes your way.

The Holding Pen

So here you are with lots on your plate, and more flowing in all the time. How do you stay sane when, halfway through your day, a delivery of brand new balls shows up at your lawn?

That’s where the “holding pen” comes in. New balls go there! And they stay there until you have time to evaluate them and assign them a priority.

I might suggest this as an overall plan for each day. First 15 minutes: Set up your lawn for today. Give yourself a good visual of everything that’s on your plate, and make your initial prioritization and time allocation decisions. Next two hours: Work at your tasks, moving balls forward, hopefully completing some tasks. Next 15 minutes: Check out the holding pen. Make appropriate priority decisions about moving balls onto the lawn, or leaving them in the pen. Next 2 hours: Work at your tasks.

Rinse and repeat.

Sorry, Dave, I Can’t Do That

Here are some more words of wisdom: You don’t have to accept every task, or every deadline. Now, there’s certainly some risk to this practice, especially if the task comes from your boss or from a customer, but it reflects a simple fact – you don’t have enough time to do all of the things that you could be/should be doing in the first place. That means something has to give!

Which would be better, to politely decline a task – or at least explain where it fits into your other priorities – or to accept it, throw another ball into the air, and risk having an unhappy boss or customer anyway, not to mention the bosses or customers connected to all the rest of the balls that come crashing down.

Two closing thoughts. First, balls on the ground are more manageable than balls in the air. There’s far less potential for catastrophe. And, as noted, *progress* is almost always an acceptable outcome, for any individual task – or your overall task list – on any individual day.